

"CHICKIE"

ELENORE MEHERIN

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"CHICKIE"

Mrs. Herschel N. Taylor



A First National Picture.

DOROTHY MACKAILL AS "CHICKIE."

"Chickie."

“CHICKIE”

A HIDDEN, TRAGIC CHAPTER
FROM THE LIFE OF A GIRL
OF THIS STRANGE “TODAY”

BY

ELENORE MEHERIN

ILLUSTRATED WITH SCENES
FROM THE PHOTOPLAY
A FIRST NATIONAL PICTURE
FEATURING DOROTHY MACKAILL



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TO A LIVING JONATHAN, NOBLER
AND MORE LOVABLE THAN ANY
PEN CAN SHOW HIM—MY FATHER
—THIS BOOK WITH ALL ITS
FAULTS IS OFFERED.

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"CHICKIE"

CHAPTER I

SWEETER THAN AN ANGEL

SHE was the only child they had. They were old-fashioned, these two. Often they looked at her, then at each other. Their eyes filled with tears.

"Chickie"—the father called her that. Sometimes at night she would go in and sit on his bed, patting his big hand, telling him with a hundred airy affectations all the news of her day; asking favors, naming little gifts that he might bring to her. Now it was that Mary, her dear, dear chum, got a new wrist watch—much smaller than hers.

"And I was just wondering, Jonathan darling, if you could have half an inch taken off mine. Think you could, cutie-cute?"

She called him all funny names like that, pinching his long mustache into a knot, leaning over him and laughing all the time.

Jonathan Bryce listened and chuckled, his whole body tingling with love.

"That Chickie of ours!" he would say to the mother afterward. "That Chickie!"

And she, lying in the dark at his side, felt as though threads of gold were cast from his heart to hers because of this last child of theirs.

"Ah, God is good to us," she murmured. Whenever they talked of Chickie the mother said this quite loud to make sure that God would hear.

Ever since Chickie's sister had died she did this. She had an idea that God was always hovering about, listening, that He liked praise and because of it would be kind to them now. He would leave them their joy in Chickie. He would remember the wound burned red and ever living in their hearts.

That once already they had knelt beside a narrow bed and felt their little thing—their dear child thing—grow cold within their arms. And saw the tiny hands relax; the little face turn gray and still. Oh, they knew it all—and the ache that comes to dwell forever in the thought.

Only Chickie was left them. They poured out their heart's love on her. Too much so, perhaps, for it was almost an anguish to them.

Like the time she made her confirmation—the white dress—the white veil. She kept her eyes down, her hands joined and walked so neatly. In the dim church her gold hair was a halo.

Jonathan strained forward in the pew—drowned in a warm tide of emotion.

Like a young angel—sweeter than a prayer . . . oh, that's what she was—that Chickie of his—he ached with love.

At these times a superstitious fear stopped him short, like a knife cleaving into his bone. What if something were to happen to Chickie?

He felt that he would rip out his veins and empty them of blood all in a moment rather than any hurt to her.

She was 16—a bright, capricious thing. Pretty and flippant, but sweet as a song.

She was at the age to see adventure in the merest trifles—always tingling with some delicious excitement, whispering some vivid secret. Even so little a thing as passing a group of boys on the way from school.

She and her great chum, Mary Blake, walked up the hill together. When Chickie drew near the corner where the young boys stood with their hands thrust in their pockets, her eyes danced. She pinched Mary's arm—all in a flush, saying, "Hurry. Oh, heavens! Mary, let's rush! The nerve! They're just staring!"

Mary blurted hotly, "I'll not hurry an inch. Don't be so silly! You give me a pain, Chickie!"

"But Arthur was there. Did you see him, Mary?"

"Well, I should throw a fit because Arthur Sontag stands on the corner!"

Chickie, pink to her temples, still conscious of the dozen lifted eyes, felt herself floating along in a dream. She felt sorry for Mary. Mary was asleep. Mary was a stone. Mary did not walk airily joyous as she, Chickie, did.

She had come now to a vivid hour. The time of her first dance. Arthur Sontag was to take her.

They had argued about it for days, those two, the mother and father. Should they let her go? So young, just 16, but she wanted it so. Why, she would just die if they said no. So it was decided.

And Chickie, wild with excitement, went about in a continual fervor. Suddenly, now, she grabbed Mary's arm. "Mary, suppose I should be a wall-flower?"

Mary shrugged with a little hint of contempt, adding sharply, "Oh, Lord, I didn't suppose you'd worry about that!"

"But were you ever a wall-flower, Mary?"

Mary's fine, intelligent face flamed. She remembered hasty and embarrassed flights to the dressing room. She remembered sitting in the dance hall in an attitude of waiting, a strained smile on her lips, glancing about as though expecting any moment a dozen partners to arrive.

"Oh, I generally manage to have a dance or two."

"But the very first time, how was it then? Why, you needn't look so superior, Mary. I'm not the only one to worry. I nearly died to-day. Dolly Bacon had that little Stella Brown in a corner and was telling her just how to make a hit. She said, 'Now, all you have to do, Stella, is just say every funny, idiotic thing that comes into your head, and be sure to keep laughing all the time.'"

Mary considered this advice, mindful of the enviable popularity of Miss Dolly Bacon. She commented tartly, "Well, it proves what I've always said: men aren't worth bothering with! I wouldn't degrade myself trying to please them."

Chickie burst out laughing.

They reached the steps of Chickie's home—a little yellow cottage with peaked roof, set back a little so that there was a small garden with a border of pink cowslips. On the left was an ell. Through this window, now golden with sun, they saw Jennie Bryce and she was sewing.

She was making Chickie's dress, soft thing of blue with little silver flowers worked into the fabric. She had been sewing on it for days, loving the stitches, her heart growing young with the work.

The two girls watched her in silence. Then Mary said, "I suppose your dress is most finished, Chickie?"

"Come in, Mary, I'll try it on—"

They did this every afternoon, Mary standing aside and giving hypercritical suggestions—the mother, plump, uncertain, pushing her spectacles back on her nose—excited because Chickie was so radiant—her eyes all shining so—

Finally the night of the great adventure came. Jennie was in a flutter. Now and then she bit her lips.

"Chickie, dear," she pleaded in her agitation, "stand still or I can never find the clasps—"

"But, Jennie darling—for pity sakes, won't you hurry! I'll be late! The dances will all be gone. Oh, mother, inside of me is just all jumping! Oh, I don't know what to do!"

Suddenly she remembered Dolly Bacon's tried and tested formula for bringing the young male to his knees. She began to think of all the funny, idiotic things she had ever heard.

Jennie caught a forgotten thread. "There," she sighed, stepping back from the bureau, her plump, gentle face rosy with pleasure. "Ah, well—quick—let your father see—"

Chickie gave a little gasp of joy, forgot the rule for making "hits," entranced at her own image in the mirror. She drew her hands together in ecstasy. "Mother! Do I really look like that? Oh, heavens!"

She ran in and stood before her father's chair—nervous—waiting for the glow to light up his face.

He put down his paper, surveyed her with rejoiced but astonished eyes.

"Chickie! Why, how grown-up you seem—I'll be blessed!"

"Oh, Jonathan angel, if you only knew how perfectly gorgeous I feel." She laid her soft cheek against his, running her fingers through his hair. "I feel all springs—all full of bubbles. Hurry—you come to the door with me—"

He went reluctant. He watched her running down the steps with this young Sontag. He heard her laughter rippling back—caught the kiss she blew to him. He leaned on the knob—suddenly heavy and old, oppressed with a sense of loss.

"She's not a child any more," he said to the mother when they two sat alone in the sad quiet that night.

"No," Jennie answered softly.

"We had no right to let her go."

"Why, Jonathan! We couldn't keep her little always."

He gave no answer, but sat with his arms folded over his newspaper.

Later when they lay awake listening for her key in the door, he said abruptly, "I wish it was a son we had—"

Jennie trembled with the shock. She repeated, stunned. "A son? Why?"

"It would be easier with a son—"

"What do you mean?"

"Well—things aren't like they were when you were young, Jennie—"

Terror like a little live thing crept through her.

"But, Jonathan—"

For two hours he had lain there tormented by his imagination. In his excitement, he sat up in the bed, shaking.

"But I won't have it, Jennie! I tell you, I won't have it! Chickie'll not carry on—"

Jennie sat up and faced him, pale with fright. Suddenly she gave a little gulping laugh. "Why, Jonathan—poor fellow! You must be crazy!"

He grew red and sheepish. "Just the same, Jennie—I see plenty to make me worry."

Her hand went down in quick comfort to his. After a long pause, she said: "Yes, Jonathan, but we can't keep her from life, can we?"

He slid back on his pillow, stirring uneasily. His child—yes? He would have wound his great arms hard about her—keep her from life!

And she was running into it—reaching out white, eager hands that beckoned—that called in rapture. "Hurry! Come!"—heart glad—senses quivering . . .

Off to her first dance—and with Arthur. Why, Mary would have given an eye to be hurrying down the hill to the school auditorium with Arthur Sontag holding her arm.

She took quick, short steps, giggling, saying between-times, "I'm so nervous—oh, Arthur, if I'm a wall-flower I'll die!"

"You? Well—any old time!"

"You're sure I won't be?"

"Well, am I?"

That lifted her up. They sailed into the dance hall, wrapped in a cloud of music. She was laughing all the time.

When the first dance began she had her program filled.

"And names all over the back, Arthur! Think of it!"

"Well, sure!" More softly: "Say—you're the prettiest girl on the floor!"

The blood rushed in a hot tide to her face. She kept her eyes down. "You're silly, Arthur."

"But you're pretty, Chickie!"

He kept looking at her until all the little springs inside began to bubble.

"Say, you're prettier than ever—" Afterward he scratched names from her program and put his own in their place.

In the fifth number, the popular Dolly Bacon passed. She was dancing with Bert Otis. They were the same height and had their cheeks touching. Chickie looked away and then back, just in time to see Dolly raise her face and carelessly take a kiss Bert Otis gave.

"Oh!" she gasped.

"You got that, Chickie?"

"Oh, no! Dolly got it!"

Suddenly she was confused and glanced at him startled. He was looking down at her with blue, piercing eyes—with eyes that seemed to flash right into her heart—to lay it open with a flame.

"Oh, Arthur!" she whispered, not knowing what to say, because of the strange, half-frightened joy that caught her.

In a hurried interval she stopped Mary. "Isn't it heavenly!"

Mary threw back softly, "He's crazy about you—Chickie—" Chickie's pulses raced.

They walked homeward slowly—arm in arm. At the summit of Twenty-First and Dolores they paused. Below them the city lay asleep—a vast, pulsing body, quiet under its purple robe—behind them, the whispering darkness of the park.

The night moved about them softly, her breath sweet with unuttered song. Far off and hushed the stars chimed in a dim, golden symphony.

"Have a good time, Chickie?" They stood close together on the top of the hill. She felt his eyes that had suddenly become so beautiful, fastened on her.

"Oh, Arthur!" she raised her face, half knowing that it was near to his and trembled: "Did you?"

They were staring at each other. She saw his eyes. He answered, "Say! say, you're sweet!"

Lowered his head ever so little—a quick, light brush of his lips on hers—half afraid.

Chickie's eyes closed. She felt that flowers dropped about her face—soft petals stained red and sweet about her mouth.

They turned into the cloistered aisle, Fair Oaks. They said nothing. Her eyes were moist. She wished to laugh, but was afraid that she might cry.

The life Jonathan wanted to keep from her opened its wild, sweet voice in Chickie's heart.

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST LOVE

No one could understand the music that opened so piercingly in Chickie's heart. Her mother couldn't. She couldn't even whisper it to Jonathan; he would laugh.

She felt herself a being set apart; drifting in a warm, rosy mist.

But she wanted to talk to Mary; it might be that Mary knew of love.

It was Saturday. So many things may happen on a Saturday. She put on her blue sweater with the frilled white collar and cuffs. As she looked into the mirror she smiled dreamily—prettiest girl on the floor—she glanced at herself through Arthur's eyes.

When she kissed her mother, saying, "I suppose Mary and I'll go to the movies," she wondered if Jennie had ever felt as she felt. Had Jennie ever been so all caught up in a lovely haze because of Jonathan whispering in her ear? Jennie, so plump and settled—ah, no!

She walked with the grace of a happy young princess down Fair Oaks to the ancient two-story, gray house where the Blakes lived.

Mary was watering the garden, holding the hose high over a stubby old Breath of Heaven and the white roses climbing up the parlor window.

"She's finished!" Chickie thought gayly, her mind going back over endless Saturdays when she had waited hour after hour for Mary to finish her tasks.

Saturday was a gray witch of a day in the Blake household; much baking; much sweeping; a regular orgy of scrubbing. Each one had certain work to do. Mary had to sweep the hall and stairs, help make the beds and bake two mammoth cakes to fill the family sweet tooth over Sunday.

Then, provided, of course, as she was fond of saying to Chickie, one of the infants didn't throw a fit or swallow the buttonhook, she was free.

Mary was somewhat irritable as a matter of habit, for the reason that her brothers and sisters were continually ridiculing her out of all the graces she so admired in Chickie and which she tried to cultivate. But her family insisted that she remain commonplace and sensible. They interfered with her imagination wherein she liked to walk in majesty; one of those terrific, queenly Helens at whose glance men turned to stone.

They had a way of saying: "Aw, come out of it. You're only Mary Blake. You can't fool us with your royal highness airs."

Mary detested this familiarity. She envied Chickie and wished in her heart that fate had made her an only child.

Now, seeing Chickie so fresh and cool, the pretty hair in deep waves and the frilly collar on her sweater, her eyes narrowed: "Gee! You're all dolled, Chickie. But you haven't done another thing all morning. A fat chance you'd have in our house to be anything but a clod. Why, Jimmy even makes fun of me because I round my finger nails, but I notice he thinks points are pretty cute when you wear them."

Chickie sighed. Darling old Jimmy! He did think her pretty cute. And he was so good to her and Mary. Didn't he take them to the Orpheum every other week. And waffles afterward!

Jimmy was Mary's older brother . . . twenty-three now. Often on Saturdays he used to come home early before she and Mary were finished with their weekly feast. He would sit on the table, teasing them, grinning at Chickie. Indeed, he was as much her brother as Mary's. Even more, because Mary often flared up furiously at Jimmy, but Chickie always found him adorable.

Now Mary said—"Oh, yes! Darling indeed! Perhaps you wouldn't think so if you had to darn his socks!"

Chickie laughed. But she thought with a pang, "Isn't she mean to-day!"

They went up the wooden steps to the kitchen. A warm sniff of gingerbread floated through the screen door.

Mary cut a huge triangle from the cake she had made. "We might as well eat in peace and quiet before the others come."

They pulled up their chairs. They had just dug their elbows in comfortably when a rich voice called over the hall banisters: "Mary! Mary, dear!"

At the note of hesitation, Mary shot a swift, eloquent glance

at Chickie, saying in exasperation: "There! Now our plans are spoiled!"

But she answered with inquiring resignation: "Yes, mother. Chickie and I are just having chocolate."

"Lucy phoned."

Mary brought her cup down to the table with a bang. "Lucy! Well, what does she want?"

"She wants you to go over for an hour."

"An hour! Well, for pity sakes, if Lucy Adams thinks I'm going to play nurse girl to her kids every blessed Saturday—"

"Mary! Why, Mary—"

"Well, I don't care! It's not fair, mother. I've just worked like a slave all morning, and now Chickie's waiting for me."

"But she only wants you for an hour."

Mary slumped into her chair; her eyes blinked.

She waited for Chickie to speak. And Chickie toyed with her cake.

She knew what Mary expected. Yet on this blithe, momentous Saturday, when adventure awaited her on every corner of Mission Street, when she wished to saunter along in the joyous sun chatting with Mary; stopping to look in shop windows; when she wanted most achingly to see Arthur Sontag; to hear what he would say—on this sweet day—she had no wish to trundle the children of Lucy Adams up and down slumbering, unromantic Twenty-Fourth Street.

But Mary sat there waiting for her offer. She gave it.

Half an hour later Mary was jouncing a baby buggy holding Lucy's two youngest, one at the top and one at the bottom, and Chickie had the twins by either hand. Little George had eaten a cookie and the crumbs were smeared all over his mouth. Mary wiped his face and turned the baby on its side. She gave Chickie a knowing glance, her lip curling a little: "This comes of falling in love!"

Chickie flushed. "You mean having all these children?" She added valiantly: "I don't see where love has anything to do with it."

"Oh, you don't!"

"Well, every one that loves doesn't—"

Mary gave her a quick appraisal. "Awfully wise, aren't you?"

"What about yourself, Mary?"

They lowered their voices, speaking eagerly, now and then

blushing and laughing. They did a great deal of this hushed talking; this mysterious speculation. They wondered bitingly about life, about love, about their own mothers and fathers and about these older Blake girls.

They were always talking about Lucy—poor Lucy!

Lucy was only twenty-eight—the oldest of the Blake family—she was married five years and already had four children. They pitied her.

Lucy returned, her arms loaded with bundles; her brown hair flying. As she approached, all the little Adamsses began to yell at once. Lucy dropped her bundles, seeming to have a dozen arms, gathering them to her and cooing happily: "Hush, now, mother's little precious; hush now."

She turned to the two girls, giving them a little box of chocolate peppermints, saying with deep gratitude: "You're just angels! I don't know whatever in the world I'd do without you. By'm by, when your turn comes, I'll be around and give you a hand."

They looked at each other, their faces crimson, and then began to titter.

"Did you get that?" Mary whispered after they bade Lucy good-by and were walking down the block. "When our turn comes! Well, none of that for mine! I can thank my sisters for opening my eyes."

"Oh, every one doesn't have a hard time like Lucy does," Chickie interrupted.

"No, that's what Lucy thought five years ago and I suppose mother didn't think that too when she was young. Look what they got!"

Chickie closed her ears. What a grating way Mary had of putting these unpleasant things right in your nose! Chickie preferred to waive aside such solid realities as children with grubby faces. She wanted love to be as she dreamed it, an undefinable sweetness that folded about her, leading her along with music in her ears.

She could never couple love with peeling potatoes; with putting fresh papers on the kitchen shelves; with rushing downtown on dollar day to buy rompers for fat little legs. Lucy Adams might do this and call it love. Martha Blake, Mary's mother, might do it.

Chickie had other fancies. She often saw herself walking on some mountain top, a magnificent, laughing fellow at her

side, his arm about her. They would watch the sun set or the moon rise. They would kiss. At this touching moment the picture became immortal; Chickie's thought went no farther.

Now, all her dreams were concentrated on one tall, brown-haired lad of nineteen. What was he doing to-day? Was he tremulously searching the streets for a chance meeting with her? Was he remembering, like the scent of flowers, the touch of her lips on his? She forgot Mary and drew a sigh from the very inside of her heart.

"Well," Mary said, gasping, "breathe in the whole earth, why don't you?"

Chickie laughed and stammered: "Oh, isn't it a perfectly gorgeous day?"

Mary mocked. "Gee! Chickie, I didn't think you'd fall so hard!"

Chickie flounced about. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Oh, you don't, hey? Well, there he is, standing right on the corner. For pity sakes, Chickie, now don't start in to giggle."

Chickie felt all hot; all shaking from head to foot; she didn't dare glance in the direction of Mary's eyes, but she waited, her breath swelling so she felt that it was tearing her in two.

"Is he coming over, Mary?"

"Is who coming over?" Mary bantered. "I thought you didn't know what I was talking about."

Chickie managed to look up. Young Arthur calmly swept off his hat, but gave not the slightest evidence of rushing to her feet.

They passed on. Chickie trembled as though she had walked through flame. She was unbelievably humiliated; afraid of Mary's thoughts. Until presently Mary relieved the tension with an exciting: "Oh, didn't he get red, though? Gee! Chickie, he's crazy about you."

Chickie could have thrown her arms about Mary's neck. She whispered softly, "Do you think so, Mary?"

"Well, do I?"

Chickie drifted back into the music's warm glow of her dream. He cared for her. From the heights of sweet ecstasy, she sighed wistfully.

CHAPTER III

SWEET SIXTEEN

CHICKIE stood in the hall where the telephone was, listening to a voice. Her heart swelled up with such a thumping she could scarcely hear. A laugh came bubbling to her lips. She managed to say: "Oh, yes! Why, yes, that's all right!"

In a dream she put the receiver on the hook. Pulses throbbed all about her throat and in her heart.

Arthur asked her to a show! Asked her why she hardly looked at him. Wanted her to be ready in half an hour.

She walked about the room drawing in her breath.

She stopped before the white bureau and absently picked up the program of her first dance, scanning his name, the lines he had drawn through other names.

The things he whispered in her ear—"pretty"—"sweet."

All that—and his blue eyes going down into her soul, and, oh! the sacred moment on the hilltop when his head had lowered.

She drew her hands together, trembling. A glowing shyness came upon her; a fear to meet him because of this exquisite sweetness they had known together.

Romance lifted its shining wings, flashed her thoughts miles beyond the present from this casual invitation to the movies to the flaming moment when Arthur would drop upon his knees, his face all white with love, and gently ask her to marry him.

It would be beautiful like that!

There was a love scene in the play. Chickie lived the tender scenes. When the hero took the girl in his arms, she dropped her head, her hand curling in Arthur's. She whispered softly: "Arthur—isn't that lovely?"

He grinned. That made her feel ashamed.

Yet, that night when he said with boyish crudeness, "Say, Chickie, gee! It's lots of fun going around with you. Say—let's do this often," she was entirely satisfied—melted as though he spoke some quivering poem.

Her days became sweet with the still music that ran beneath

all the commonplace. They went often to the movies. They took walks. They phoned.

Chickie dwelt in a flame of expectance, waiting the moment when his eyes delved into hers, to hear him say: "Chickie, I love you!"

Her imagination was a soft fire making pictures.

Sometimes when he called at night she would sit at the piano and play the treble, making up her own bass to the poignant song, "Call Me Thine Own." She was carried away with sweet yearning. She fancied he would come and stand behind her, that he would reach over, cover her hands slowly with his, draw her to her feet. They would be swept together like rivers sparkling, tumultuous.

Once, coming to the last bar of the music, she turned, expecting to see his eyes dark pools of fire, expecting to see him dumb with emotion. He rubbed his hand over his brown hair, swung over to her with a "Gee! Chickie, you like those melancholy things. Say, that's awfully funny. Give us a little jazz."

Yet there were moments so sweet they dropped into her thoughts like an immortal fragrance.

One night, after a show, they stood before Chickie's house, still, monastic, quiet like an old faded canopy stretched about the secluded street. Its silence whispered with forgotten things—dim pulse of sorrows—murmur of banished joy. They looked up the steep hill.

"It's early," Arthur said. "Let's take a walk."

They went to the summit—where they had stood those months and months ago. Chickie's breath grew faint. Was he remembering? Was he all trembly now?

The moon came up like a cold, silver ball, came up from the heart of the Potrero Hills and floated quietly into the embrace of purple mists. It rested there, sending down vague ladders of light to the house tops.

"Oh, Arthur, remember?" Chickie murmured. "Look out there—that's beautiful—"

"Yes." Then after a pause: "You like things like that, don't you, Chickie?"

She liked them so much just then that she felt her heart a cup of warm tears melting and running over. She answered, "Don't you, Arthur?"

"Sure! But most girls don't. You're different. You're not a bit like others."

She no longer felt the earth under her feet; she no longer saw hills nor the sky; she was one with them; one with the sweet infinite harmony.

Just that little incident kept her imagination warm for weeks.

She was the eternal woman aching with love, waiting for this obtuse, resistant young male to awaken, to receive the gift that trembled in her hands.

They were nearly finished business college when Mary said: "Oh, I suppose you won't take a position. You and Arthur'll get married?"

Chickie flushed. How she had hungered for some such sign from him. How she waited for him to protest—"Say, what's the use of your starting work anyhow? Haven't I got a good job? We might just as well—"

The thing happened one Sunday. They were walking to the beach. Spring, the earth quivering as though from out its deep, quiet heart there came now rejoicing, awakening with song to new joys—all the million young sleeping here so still through all the centuries—awakening now and tripping with buoyant step upon the grass.

Just as they neared the conservatory all the tulips began waking in their beds of crimson and gold, stretching delicate fingers and yawning prettily until they were all abloom.

Chickie caught his arm, laughing.

Her hair blew across his cheek. He brushed it gently aside; put his grinning face next to hers. "Say, Chickie, you're all blown to pieces. Say, Chickie, your eyes are shining like anything. Gosh! But you have swell eyes!"

All through her went a quivering expectance; she felt her face pale, then suddenly race with color. He was staring at her. She said, abashed: "Oh, you say such silly things, Arthur!"

He repeated: "Well, you've got the prettiest eyes I ever saw."

Chickie felt her heart grow light, rise and float away with her. She was still lost in a misty happiness as they sat at a corner table in the long narrow dining room of the old Swiss Chalet. The waves sparkled; blackbirds came mincing quaintly up to the stone steps. Far out a ship etched against the sky.

She looked into Arthur's young, tanned face so alive now

with its running color, its laughing eyes. She thought him so handsome, it melted her just to look at him.

"I'd like to be on that ship," Chickie said, with the eternal talk of seventeen to twenty. "I'd like to be going off somewhere far away."

"Some day I'm going."

"When?"

"Oh, in a year or two. They say there's great chances down in South America. After you get a good job, Chickie, why don't you save up and travel, too?"

Chickie's breath swelled. She said softly: "Jonathan doesn't want me to work."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. You see, I'm the only one and then he thinks there's so many other things you can do."

"Oh, I don't know. Most girls work to-day. You'd never be satisfied staying home, Chickie."

She felt as though he had put out his hand and coolly shoved her out of his life. She answered bravely: "But I love a home. I've always thought a little shingled bungalow with roses in the garden would be so sweet."

She was unaware that the eyes he found so pretty were now all glowing with hurt; that they searched him and told him more nakedly than words her secret hopes.

He said largely: "Oh, sure, that's all right. But, gee whiz! you're not ready to settle down yet, are you? Say, I wouldn't think of it, if I were you, for about five or ten years."

It was like a refusal—as though she had offered herself and he had turned her down.

The next morning those words were the first things she remembered. They returned to her with a pang; they whispered in her ear until she grew hot with shame.

But they went to the movies the same as usual. At the door he stooped and kissed her. It softened everything.

Then a terrible thing happened. A week went by, and two, and he didn't phone or come or send a single word.

She went to Mary's one Saturday afternoon. She went past the stunted palm, up the neglected lawn that ran along the side of the Blake house, to the kitchen door.

Little Tommy Blake came down the steps, Mary after him, crying indignantly: "Oh, you wait, you little villain! You just wait, Tommy Blake! I'm going right up to mother."

Tommy crouched behind a post in the yard, stuck his thumb to his nose and wagged all ten fingers, yelling: "Gee! Ain't you grand, though! Mother! Say, who do you mean, mommer?"

Mary waved her hand, saying with a gulp: "How would you like that, Chickie? And I spent a whole hour decorating that cake!" She pointed to the table.

There was a cake with little finger-marks in the soft chocolate glaze, with big gouges where the nuts had been hurriedly scooped out.

Chickie's heart was too sore for a trifle like that.

"What do you care?" she said carelessly. "You won't have to bake for them all your life."

"Oh, I won't! Well, how do you know? Just because you're going to marry Arthur Sontag you think I won't have to stick right on here!"

"Don't be an idiot, Mary. I would not think of marriage, even with Arthur!"

Mary looked at her mystified, whispering excitedly. "What's happened? Heavens!"

Chickie suddenly wished to leave—to be alone. Mary was too sharp. Mary might get the whole thing out of her. But Mary set out the cups as was their Saturday custom. They sat down.

"I won't dream of getting married," Chickie said with a great air, "until Arthur's had a chance to save. As long as I've gone to business college I might as well work."

"Sure," Mary agreed. "You won't catch me tying myself down at eighteen. I'm thankful for one thing. I know what marriage means!"

They moved their chairs a little closer together. They hunched their elbows.

The screen door banged.

"Ho, ho!" Tommy, chewing a great wad of gum, his eyes half lost in their setting of freckles, sidled over to the table. He made a funny grimace, twisting his shoulder at Chickie.

She paid no attention. He flipped his hat into the air, caught it on one finger. "He-he-he! Just saw something! Just saw yer feller on Mission Street, Chickie! He! Saw him walkin' along with Dolly Bacon!"

She grew all cold inside—and then all wild with heat.

Mary jumped up and grabbed Tommy by the coat. "O-oh! You little vixen! You better run!"

But she didn't say a word to Chickie.

Arthur never phoned again.

One day Chickie met him. "Oh, hello there, Chickie!" He said just that and didn't stop.

That was the day her heart broke.

CHAPTER IV

CHICKIE MEETS JANINA

CHICKIE couldn't bear the sight of her own eyes—so gray and sweet and rimmed with black. They made her think of whispered things. She turned from them, holding in tears. Her gayety was gone. Even when she talked with Jonathan.

He took her face one night and raised it in his great palms, searching it hungrily. "What's happened to all the little springs, Chickie?"

She shut her eyes quickly, pulling his hands away. "Never you be so curious, cutie-cute."

He drew her to him, chuckling. "Well, you've got your old dad, haven't you?"

She cried. And then she told him. And how her heart was broken.

He shouldn't have laughed as his arms tightened. But he did. She rushed from him into her room, slamming the door.

Gradually her heart grew together—almost dismayed her, it healed so quickly. The glow came back to the sun and even the moon regained its silver beauty.

Only now and then, when she passed that imp of a Tommy Blake and he'd shrill out, "Aw, say, Chickie—how's yer feller?" did she feel a hot knife flashing through her.

In a few months she could even banter about it. When Mary teased, "Gosh! but didn't you have the case on Arthur Sontag, though? Remember?" Chickie would toss her head with debonair lilt and whistle lightly. "Well, you know, when one is sweet sixteen—"

Yet, deep in her mind was a loitering sweet regret as of something gentle and holy that was gone and would never be quite so piercingly experienced again—the flashing, deep astonishment of love when it is new. A woman remembers her first emotion so.

But she no longer dreamed of a bungalow with a garden—so sweet—

She began to look forward with frightened eagerness to

work—to the moment when she would leave the gentle quiet of Jonathan's little yellow cottage and go downtown to a business office—a tremendous thing in the life of a girl not yet eighteen.

At the school the girls were all on fire with questions. What kind of a job would they get? Suppose they should forget everything?

That happened sometimes. Old graduates told fearsome experiences. Edna Stickney, for instance. She had three bosses. One of them talked so rapidly his own breath couldn't keep up with him—but heaven help her if she got so much as a comma twisted! Tales like that sent them into shivers of apprehension.

Chickie got a place in a big brokerage office. The morning trembled when she was to go. Jennie bustled about the kitchen, red, talking to herself. She insisted on packing a lunch that Chickie didn't want.

Chickie doubled it up hard and stuck it in her purse. Jennie protested. Chickie was almost crying. "Oh, mother! Do you want me to carry a paper lunch bag on the car! Nobody does that!"

Jonathan, brushing her suit, whispered as though she were a child. "There! Nervous? Shucks! Nothing to fear!" It was his own big hand—not hers—that shook.

Nothing terrible about that first day. No woman-eating man, volleying out wild-fire dictation—just a nice mild fellow, like anybody's brother or son, took her into a little glassed-in corner of the big square room and handed her some printed slips with blanks where she was to type. . . .

"You'll be careful, Miss Bryce, to get the names correctly, won't you?"

And he hoped she'd like the place—and he was sure the other girls would help her.

There were four of them in the room, and one that the others called "Janina" flashed out as though made of flames. She was a young Pole, dark, with black hair drawn Grecian fashion to the nape of her neck. She had pale olive skin—a too prominent nose and red, clean-cut lips, the upper one short, curling. Striking—even handsome in a hard, glittering way. Chickie was drawn by the extraordinary brilliance of the girl's dark eyes.

Their glances met and the dark one smiled. It made her

whole face intensely vivid as though suddenly struck with light.

That very first noon when Chickie came back from lunch, Janina met her in the dressing room. She took off her hat and with prima donna nonchalance dropped it on the waste basket. She began combing her black hair.

Then she noticed Chickie. "This your first job?"

Chickie answered stiffly: "Yes, it is."

Janina, pulling her hair out the merest trifle, coolly put her through a cross-examination. "How old?"

Chickie had no better sense than to answer: "Eighteen, almost."

Then Janina, extremely busy with her lip stick, laughed: "Eighteen! Poor, proud and pure, I take it!"

"Oh!" Chickie gasped.

Janina's eyes crinkled with amusement. "Remember, little one," she cautioned, "poor, proud and pure is always lonesome."

Chickie turned scarlet.

She had scarcely recovered from the shock of this first meeting—she was still guessing at the dark, guilty meaning of Janina's words when the young Pole all but twisted the gayety out of Chickie's heart.

It was an afternoon toward the end of her second week. The window of the dressing room looked down over office buildings and far out even to the clear blue of the lake. Chickie was idling here a moment.

In one office a girl came in, took off her hat. . . . Then the girl was sitting at a desk in the corner. . . . A man entered. He sat on the edge of the desk. The two began to talk.

How nice and friendly Chickie thought. Pleasant to be working. Just then Janina opened the door—leaned over Chickie's shoulder. Just then, too, the man gripped the girl's hand. They were both laughing.

"Cosy, eh! Wonder how Mrs. Turner would like that?" Janina mocked.

"Mrs. Turner? Why should she care?" Chickie asked, mystified.

"She shouldn't! But wives are all stupid. They do care!"

"Oh—you mean that man is married?"

"Is he! And has three kids to boot!"

"Oh—! Oh, isn't it awful!"

Janina's lips curled: "What's awful about it? A man's still human, isn't he, for all that the marriage yoke tries to turn him into a dumb beast. He has eyes, still, and a heart. Fudge! The nicest men are all married!"

Chickie's eyes burned—she felt a curious heat rushing up to her neck.

"You mean they all do things like that?"

Janina's mouth raised in pity: "Nine out of ten! Official statistics!"

Chickie felt a sudden, hard aversion for this mocking, superb Janina. She said angrily, "I don't believe it! I don't believe it!"

But the thought went into her heart and weighed there heavy and cold like a stone.

Yet Janina's wisdom—Janina's immense sophistication drew her like a magnet—like a hunger at once cruel, yet irresistible. She was soon listening—soon flushed and eager as the others of Janina's following.

The girls in the office had a habit of running into the dressing room for a little chat or a secret smoke. Here Janina held court. She gave out vivid advice about men, about life, about love. She was consulted and envied as a kind of Delphic oracle.

Janina had received a wide, even a brilliant, education. She spoke, besides her own tongue, French, German and Russian. She read extensively. Yet for all this, she remained intensely primitive and crude.

Janina was a free soul—modern to her finger tips. She boasted that her past went back to the Garden of Eden.

Sitting on the window ledge, smoking a cigarette, she was accustomed to say: "As you know, Eve was the first feminist, the first rebel, a scouter of tradition, a mocker of double standards. You will recall that the first lady of the land was ejected from Paradise for disorderly conduct. All honor to Eve! Fruit hung in the garden; she ate it. And I likewise, Mother Eve!"

This was one of her favorite speeches.

Chickie, bursting with vivid curiosity, told all this to Mary, adding many a "Janina says this; Janina says that; Janina was telling us—"

Mary drank in this wisdom hungrily. They weighed, with hushed, excited wonderment, the worth of Janina's philosophy. They discussed this matter of popularity with a hot intensity as

though it were the one purpose for which they were born. As financiers reckon the worth of other men by their money pile, Mary and Chickie classed their associates according to the number and brilliance of their masculine followers.

Once Chickie even told Jimmy all about Janina. Jimmy came over most every night. Often he would go into the kitchen and lift the covers off the pots. If he liked what little Jennie was cooking better than the dinner waiting on his mother's stove, he would get out a knife and fork and sit down to the table with them. Jonathan thought the world of Jimmy.

Now that Chickie was working, he used to wait for her at the corner. They walked up the block together.

This night Chickie had her gold hair drawn into a big psyche on the top of her head with two ridiculous Chinese pins stuck in like green swords.

She did it to be fancy, she told Jonathan when he roared at her.

It made her small, sweet chin very pointed—her eyes enormous. Jimmy sat on the wicker davenport staring at her.

Chickie stretched her neck slowly. "Aren't I the most gorgeous-looking girl on the earth, Jimmy darling?"

"Sure you are! You always were!"

"And I so poor and proud and pure. I'm like to die of loneliness!"

Jimmy's eyes narrowed. Then he laughed: "Well, where'd you get that—"

Chickie shrugged. "Well——Janina knows——"

All unsuspecting she breezed forth with Janina's hard wisdom—even told him one of Janina's caustic formulas for winning and holding the truant male in leash.

When she began he teased her, but as she went on Jimmy's face hardened. "Look here, Chickie—you don't want to listen to that——"

"But, Jimmy, a girl has as much right, hasn't she——"

"Hell——"

Chickie laughed: "Of course! I suppose you've never kissed a girl—oh, no!"

He caught her by the shoulders. His eyes were all tight and black. "Look here, Chickie, well, let me tell you, the man doesn't live that's worth your even thinking things like this—why—say——"

Chickie laughed because his mouth trembled and got white,

She ran her fingers through his hair, whispering, "Darling old Jimmy," as though he were her grandfather, "darling old Jimmy—don't you worry."

The next afternoon she worked late. Harry Lewis, the nice, mild-looking fellow, the head of her department, stopped at her desk. "Still at it, Miss Bryce? Say—been to the Curran this week? Suppose we go Saturday?"

"Why—" Chickie hesitated. "Oh, all right."

She was breathing quick with excitement when she went to the dressing room.

She didn't see Janina until Janina said: "Oh, so Harry's fallen! Good luck, baby! You're on your way now!"

CHAPTER V

DON'T BE A PRUDE

IN Janina's eyes was a little spark of malignant triumph. It made Chickie at once uneasy and defiant.

In the next three days she found Janina glancing at her with the same quiet exultance. She wondered, "What is Janina thinking?"

Saturday at noon Janina said: "Have a good time, little one."

"Always do!" Chickie called back flippantly.

But she was on edge. She said to Mary: "I wish I wasn't going."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Don't get stage fright. You may fall in love with him."

"Never!"

"Anyway—it can't hurt to go out with him just once."

"No—." Yet Chickie's reluctance grew. She kept thinking of the malice in Janina's eyes. When Jonathan, nervous as an old woman, with his arm about her shoulder, grew preachy, she forgot to tease him.

"Look here, Chickie, I want you to come home right after the show."

"What makes you say such a thing, Jonathan? Where should I go?"

"Well—you might want to go somewhere and dance. And that's right with Jimmy and with boys you know. Not with these strange young men."

Chickie brightened. "Ho! Funny old Jonathan! 'Fraid the wolves will pounce on cutie's little lamb?"

Why was Jonathan always saying things like that?

She scarcely spoke to Harry Lewis as they drove downtown. But in the theater she stole a sharp glance at his mild, pleasant face; caught a friendly smile in his eyes.

What a little idiot she was! As though a man wasn't just as harmless as ever anything could be! Oh, Janina would laugh if she knew how stiff and nervous Chickie had been!

She turned gay and sparkling. She sighed with admiration

over the gowns the actress wore. And soon she felt at ease.

But when the play was over and he took her arm, saying, carelessly, "Glorious night. Suppose we take a little ride to the beach. I've an idea you swing a wicked foot!" When he said that she answered quickly and very flushed, "Oh, no!" He seemed insulted. She made it worse by adding: "Oh, I didn't mean it like that. Why—it's quite late now—"

He remained stiffly silent.

In pure nervousness, Chickie laughed. Her poise returned. She laughed again.

"Oh, well, Mr. Lewis, don't be so huffy! You see it's like this—I'm father's only child. He's a queer old fellow. He'll sit up waiting for me.

"And, of course, I didn't dream you were going to be so awfully nice and ask me to the beach, so I promised to come home early and if I don't show up he'll ring up the morgue and the police and the Old Ladies' Home. . . ."

He forced a smile—with a touch of sarcasm: "You haven't brought papa up right, have you? Well—how's the Palace? That's near to home. . . ."

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not to-night. You see as long as I told him I'd come—"

"Oh, well! Then I suppose I'll have to freeze you to death with ice cream?"

She took it seriously. "Oh, I'd like that!"

He burst out laughing, but they went and had a chocolate sundae.

At the door Mr. Lewis swept off his hat with the gallantry of a prince. "We'll have to put papa to bed before we go next time!"

Chickie caught the touch of grinning malice. As she went tiptoeing down the hall Jonathan called: "Is that you, Chickie?"

After she was in bed Jennie came paddling in, the candle in her hand—face all gentle. Chickie wouldn't open her eyes. They were smarting with defeat.

Monday morning Janina greeted her eagerly. "You didn't come out to the Tait's Saturday. The whole crowd was waiting. Go to the Palace?"

"No."

"Where?"

"Ah! You'd like to know, I take it!" Chickie closed her eyes with a sigh mysterious and taunting.

But a few days later Janina whipped off her hat, her face alive with wicked delight. She stood at Chickie's desk looking down at the golden head, raising an eyebrow and smiling. She seemed about to go into hysterics. "So you did, did you? Ah, you little cut-up. You did, did you?"

Chickie, sharpening her pencils, gave Janina a look of pity. "Why all the glee?"

Janina with a full tormenting laugh, sauntered to her desk, sending amused, half contemptuous glances at her.

Then she tossed a note. On it was typed, all the letters in capitals: "CHICKIE BRYCE, WILD WOMAN! LOOK OUT FOR HER. SHE EATS CHOCOLATE SUNDAES. HIP, HIP, HURRAY!"

Chickie crumpled the paper, tore it into bits.

The delicious incident furnished Janina with a hundred cruel little arrows that stuck sorely into Chickie's pride. Her lips curled with mockery.

"Poor ole Harry! Thought he'd come a-strutting triumphantly out to the crowd with my lovely little golden girl on his arm! Thought he'd have them all green with envy!

"Hass's! She feeds him ice cream! Ah! Papa's little baby. Tuck her in at night."

That made Chickie's heart burn, Janina and Harry Lewis sneering at Jonathan!

And it happened that very afternoon, when she was forced to take some papers into the little glassed-in office, Harry Lewis took them leisurely, asking her questions, smiling, eyes twinkling: "Papa still sitting up late, Miss Bryce?"

Chickie turned sharply, winking, trying to pass it off lightly with a laugh, but it bit too deeply. Struggling to keep her lips from twitching, she said: "I made a great mistake, Mr. Lewis, to speak of my father to you." She rushed out of his office, quivering, lest the tears should run out of her eyes. She expected to be dismissed. She thought: "Now, he'll tell that to Janina, too."

But nothing happened except that Mr. Lewis became very stiff and business-like whenever she went to his office. He rattled papers, gave out crisp orders.

He didn't ask her to a show again.

One day, about a month later—a month of loneliness for Chickie—she and Janina passed him on the street.

Janina said: "Didn't get very far with that affair, did you?"

"Oh, as far as I wished," Chickie answered, with magnificent condescension.

Janina laughed quietly, "So? Well, whether you want it or not, you won't get very far with the reputation you're winning."

Chickie stood still, "What do you mean, Janina?"

"If you can't take a tip, Chickie, don't. If you think fellows like Harry Lewis and Chris Thomas—you went out with him once, didn't you?—are going to have their Saturday nights spoiled by a darn little prude—"

It was Chickie's turn to sneer. "I should worry about Harry Lewis or Chris Thomas!"

Janina grew winsome, laughing at Chickie. "Ah, but you do. That's the irony of being a woman. We're all on our knees to them. We've been put there by centuries of training. We watch their faces, glad when they smile, wretched when they don't."

Janina walked along in silence. Then she whispered, half taunting, in Chickie's ear: "Not much of a petter, are you?"

"What!" Chickie was suddenly all on fire with shame.

Janina shrugged. "Oh, well; men and babies, you know! Both alike. We have to dandle them if we want to see them coo—"

Janina broke off abruptly, her vivid face suddenly pale. Coming directly to them was a tall, magnificent fellow, with black eyes and a flashing, kingly air. Jake Munson. Chickie knew of him. She had heard endless gossip about him.

Munson was at the head of a big brokerage business, a man about 35, wealthy, magnetic, a lavish spender.

Every girl in Chickie's office was wild about Jake Munson. They kept detailed tab on him. They knew who he was taking out, who happened to be driving a gray roadster he owned. When he gave a diamond wrist-watch to Amy Heaton, every girl on Montgomery Street learned of it before two months were past.

Janina withdrew into a fury of contemptuous silence when Jake Munson was discussed by these other girls.

Now she put out her hand, saying, with a touch of eager humility—shutting Chickie out—"Hello, Jake! Haven't you forgotten about to-morrow night? Oh, say, did you hear about Bess?" Chickie was about to walk on when Munson said, "Aren't you going to introduce your friend, Janina?"

"Oh, sure! She's my particular discovery, Jake. My own little shrinking violet, Miss Chickie Bryce."

Chickie felt the man's rich dark eyes dwelling kindly on her face. She wanted to say something easy, something superior and woman-of-the-world like, but Janina's taunt left her red and flighty.

Munson laughed. "A violet, Janina? What a treat in this day to come upon the vanishing species—"

Janina bit her lips, her olive skin dashed with red. She didn't say a word to Chickie as they walked back to the office.

Not long after this Chickie passed Jake Munson on the street. With a delightful friendliness he stopped and began to talk. "You and Janina friends, Miss Bryce?"

"Yes, we work together." Chickie liked the warm vitality of his face.

He towered over her, smiling. "Well, then, we'll have to arrange a little party. You'll come? I'll tell Janina."

She went hurrying back to the office, aquiver with flushed elation.

Janina was in the dressing room. She put her arm affectionately in Chickie's, whispering, with a soft, malicious laugh, "Trying a fling at Jake? Better not, baby—take it from me you'll not get away with it. A good fire can melt a little snow. Watch out!"

CHAPTER VI

JIMMY SPEAKS

CHICKIE turned on the faucet and began very elaborately to wash her hands.

"Huffed?" Janina asked. "Not sore because I gave you a little pointer?"

"Oh, I don't think I want any of your pointers, Janina. The man doesn't live that's worth all that trouble!"

The brilliant eyes narrowed—threw out little intense darts of amusement. "Oh, he doesn't? Well—just you wait, my pretty one! You'll find that such a man does live. We all find that out. Whether we like it or not we dance to their tunes! Sooner or later!"

Chickie dashed the water from her hands: "That for you and your pointers, Miss Knowles!"

She wanted to push Janina—give her a good shove, get out into the sun, let the clean air sweep about her. Janina often made her feel like that.

Chickie had never caught life naked as Janina had. To her it appeared always vague and beautiful—a dream form, garmented in silver, passing with music.

She wanted to see it so. Now, when Janina tore at the nebulous robe, springing back with a laugh as the blemishes lay bare, Chickie covered her eyes. She clung passionately—with the grim pathos of youth—to her ardent illusions.

Oh, she wanted to believe the world a glad, happy place, where women sing and children laugh; where tall, kingly fellows like Jake Munson go about doing only great and noble things. No viciousness behind that flashing smile—

Yet Janina's voice hooted in her ears.

At five o'clock she met Mary coming from work. Mary had some shopping to do—she was looking for a lace vest—something dainty and ever so fetching—easy to find if Mary didn't also require that it be cheap.

The girl behind the counter took down the long green boxes—"Here's a pretty thing." It was a combination of

Irish lace and hand embroidery, with a little round collar—just what Mary wanted. She tried eagerly to see the price tag, but with its usual perversity, the card was wrong side up. The girl noted this, turned the tag with a breezy “sixteen and a hawlf!”

Mary frowned with annoyance.

“Sixteen and a hawlf!” she snapped indignantly to Chickie as they walked out. “Did you notice that vest of hers and the five-dollar stockings and the twenty-dollar shoes. How do they do it?”

Chickie’s lip went up with a breezy, “Good petters, I dare say!”

She felt Mary stiffen. A flash of angry silence. Then with a sneering drawl, “I wouldn’t be so glib quoting that one if I were you, Chickie!”

“You mean Janina?”

Mary’s eyes faced clear ahead. She walked on swiftly—silent. Abruptly she said: “She makes me furious! I think we ought to cut her out completely—”

Chickie had a sharp, sudden tightening in her throat.

“She’s an empty, shallow thing! I wouldn’t listen to a word she says. Why, what does she know of love or anything!”

Mary’s voice softened; her face became suddenly intent and flushed.

Chickie thought with a shock of amazement. “Mary! Well—of all things! Why—look at her—she’s getting pretty!”

Aloud she said, “You used to be rather glad to hear what Janina had to say.”

“Yes—well—it’s all right for Janina to have those views. She can get away with that kind of stuff, but you and I never could—”

“How do you figure that?”

“Don’t act stupid, Chickie! You know as well as I that Janina Knowles is as hard and selfish as though she were made of steel. She can do things and laugh that would make you cry forever.”

“Just the same, Mary, she lives in the same world as we do and the men she meets are no different, whether we believe it or not—”

“Don’t you ever think that, Chickie. There are men that Janina knows nothing about.”

The color went sweeping into Mary’s face. She stopped

suddenly before a shop window, pointing to a string of beads. "Stunning, aren't they? Look—here comes Ethel Bird—don't talk long. I want to hurry home. . . ."

That evening when Chickie sauntered down to the Blakes, Mary was plucking roses in the old dilapidated garden.

"Let's take a walk," Chickie said. "I want to buy some ribbon."

"I can't."

"Going out?"

"No."

Chickie came close and whispered: "For heaven sakes! What's up, Mary?"

Snip, snip, snip—Mary's scissors were all over the bush, her face pink to the line of her soft brown hair. "Nothing! What are you talking about? Wait till to-morrow. I'll go with you then."

Walking pensively down the block, Chickie came face to face with Edward McPike. The young man grabbed off his hat, saying stiffly, "Nice evening, Miss Bryce."

Chickie watched him with a little chill of dismay. So that was it. Edward McPike—the young chemist who worked for the same wholesale drug company as Mary.

Chickie had met him once and Mary had said, "He's brilliant. He has a big future." Chickie had seen only a quiet, clumsy fellow with one shoulder a little higher than the other, his legs too short for the powerful frame they supported.

And now he was standing at Mary's door, pulling his coat down, thrusting a glove nervously in his pocket. Now the door was opening—

Oh—surely Mary wasn't blushing and looking all sweet and eager because of Edward McPike! Chickie stood perfectly still—staring at the parlor windows of the Blakes. A light commenced to shine; loneliness went in a pang through her.

There were often nights after that when Mary couldn't take a walk; when Mary didn't want to go to the movies. And finally when Jimmy took them to the Orpheum, Edward McPike came along.

He and Mary sat together. He had a way of looking at Mary with his eyes intent and childlike as though he thought her a most beautiful person. When Mary looked up to find his eyes like that, a loveliness seemed to awaken like a light in

her face as though she spoke, as though she murmured to him: "Oh, Edward—there's only you in all the world."

They went afterwards as they always did and had waffles. When Edward talked, he balanced a fork on his finger, keeping his eyes down as though he were extremely shy and uncertain of himself. But he said sharp, arousing things, now and then glancing at Mary.

Chickie could almost feel, like warm, elated presences, the smiles stepping forth so proudly from Mary's lips. They gave her a kind of sparkling and manifold vitality.

Jimmy noticed it too. When he held Chickie's coat he whispered, teasing: "Say, throw me a look or two like that. Ready now. I'll give the agonizing stare—pull a blush."

When the four parted at Chickie's steps, Edward and Mary going slowly down the block, Chickie sighed: "They like each other, Jimmy?"

He stood at the gate-post musing, "They sure do!"

"Mary seems all thrilled. Humph—were you ever in love, Jimmy?"

He looked down at her and laughed, his black, thick hair blown straight across his forehead. He kept looking at her with half a grin on his mouth until she said, "Well, were you?"

"Oh, for the little matter of four or five years."

"I mean truly."

"So do I."

"You honestly were, Jimmy?"

"I honestly am, Chickie."

She tossed her head. "It doesn't mean much to a man, does it?"

He answered extravagantly and using one of her own words, "Oceans!"

"Oh, my, yes! Oceans—if only you can have all the waves you want in them! I think it's sad, Jimmy, that men should be like that."

"Like what?"

"Faithless."

He grinned. "You've found us out, already?"

"No, but honestly, Jimmy, that's true, isn't it? Tell me, isn't it the truth that nine out of ten men—well, that you just can't bet on them?"

"There's always the tenth, you know."

"You can't even be sure of that—or of getting the tenth."

Still he laughed: "Yep. There's one girl in the world who can be sure."

"Who?"

"My girl!"

Suddenly she was aware of his excited face turned to hers; his quick, sharp breath. He started to speak, broke off uneasily. He said with a shrug, "Well—I don't think we need worry over Mary."

"No—thank goodness! Mary wouldn't dream of marriage for years and years."

"She won't? What makes you think that? Why shouldn't she?"

"Oh, Jimmy, of course she won't. Edward is poor, and do you think Mary wants to step into a hard time like Lucy has?"

"But suppose she loves him?"

"Anyway!"

"Wouldn't you, Chickie?"

"No!"

"You would if you loved a man. You'd want to marry him even if he was poor."

"I would not! I tell you, Jimmy, I would not."

He answered quietly, with none of his old teasing lightness, but his happy eyes all tight again and black, "I tell you that you will—Chickie. Sooner than you think!"

CHAPTER VII

IN THE CHURCH

LUCY's little son George was just getting over the mumps. Martha Blake, his grandmother, wanted him to have this great jar of chicken broth. It would put bone and sinew into the lad—bring the color back to the white little cheeks.

Would Mary and Chickie mind running down with it? Cheer Lucy up a bit—the poor girl hadn't been out of the house in weeks.

She loaded their arms with bundles.

They went in the back way. Lucy was in the kitchen heating a saucepan of milk. Wisps of her pale brown hair hung about her forehead. As she turned to greet them little quivers ran about her lips. She kept her eyes down, but the lids were red, as though she had been crying.

They were half ashamed to look at her. They put down their bundles hastily. Mary said: "Mother sent over this soup, Lucy—for Georgie. And here's a bag of the most gorgeous doughnuts. Try one."

Lucy kept her back to them, intent on the milk. Chickie could see her cheek. A slow tear was trickling from the corner of her eye.

She slipped her arm about Lucy's waist, whispering timidly, "Little George isn't worse, is he?"

Lucy shook her head.

"Lucy, darling—you're just tired."

Lucy faced them then, her mouth twitching miserably. "Oh, I ought to be ashamed of myself, I suppose. But Teddy fell and cut his hand, and George had to go to lodge and I was here all alone."

She shook her head back, bringing a laugh that was full of tears to her lips. "Well, there; I guess it's just the strain. You two are just angels, coming over so much. I'll never be able—"

She couldn't finish, but went over to the table, opening the bag of doughnuts. "I have some lovely jelly. Sit down, I'll make a cup of chocolate."

From the adjoining room came a petulant, "Mamma—mamma."

"There—he's awake—Georgie, I'm coming—mother's coming—" Lucy flew down the hall.

Almost immediately other voices rose. "Mamma—a jink—I wanna jink of water." Then Teddy, "Mamma, my hand hurts! It hurts orful!"

Lucy's gentle voice soothed, "Never mind now. Mother'll kiss it. There—it's better. Go to sleep."

Lucy came back to the kitchen. She didn't sit down. There was the baby's food to prepare; little clothes to fold; bottles to sterilize.

They helped her, trying to squeeze in a lot of cozy, intimate chatter, but Lucy kept saying, "Yes? Oh, what was that?" and running into the pantry, then out to the porch, coming back with, "What's that you were saying?"

She seemed entirely unaware of this nervous tensity. When they were leaving her face had a pretty flush. "Why, I feel a thousand times better! Drop in to-morrow—please—we'll have another quiet little chat—"

They walked home slowly, arm in arm. The Summer night drifted softly about the old gardens along Fair Oaks, anointing her robes with the distilled fragrance of roses and sweet peas, coming out again languorous with dreams. It swayed about them, sweet with romance.

Chickie said, "Oh, isn't it glorious, though? And poor Lucy stuck in the house there. It's just a shame. She's so sweet with it all!"

"That's because underneath Lucy is really happy."

"Oh, Mary! Why, she doesn't know what happiness means! Lucy's only thirty, and she can look down her whole life and see that there just never is going to be any pleasure in it. Why, she can't think of herself for a single minute—couldn't even sit down and talk to us. Just look at her, and how pretty she used to be! Her whole life is doomed."

Mary's lips tightened in a flaming silence. She said suddenly, with a rapid catch in her voice: "It's only because Lucy's nervous now. She's been terribly worried, and so many things come all at once."

Chickie nodded dubiously. "I'd just like to bet, Mary, that if Lucy could have known all this, she'd never—"

Mary interrupted with a quiet finality, "She'd do the very same thing again."

Chickie trembled. "Mary, you don't really believe that?"

"Yes! Yes. Oh, Lucy was terribly in love. I can remember. She used to go about almost in a trance. She was wild about George. She is yet. What was there for her if she didn't marry?"

Mary went on now in a feverish excitement, quickening her pace, digging her fingers hard against Chickie's arm. "Why, what else could she do? If you love, you have to marry. For pity sakes, Chickie, do you think people can stop living just because life is hard?"

"It's not hard for every one, and if Lucy didn't have so many children all at once it wouldn't be hard for her. Look at Nora Bright. She loved and married, and has everything just the way she wants it, and not one single thing to bother her."

"Nora Bright!" A shrug of contempt. "Why, she's not half as happy as Lucy. You know what I've learned, Chickie? People that have the hardest times, like Lucy and my mother, get the very most out of life. They go down and feel the heart of things. Nora Bright reminds me of a big bisque doll that is always smiling because it never feels."

"Oh, you sound just like your mother, Mary. You're only repeating things she's said hundreds of times."

"Yes—well, I used to think mother was just kidding herself along. She gave up her own life and all her dreams. You know all that poetry she wrote when she was teaching school and she wanted to write. Then she got married and had all of us. I always thought she was just trying to fool herself into being glad about losing so much. Now I know she meant it all and she was glad—glad as could be.

"She'd really go through every bit of it again. You know, Chickie, when Jimmy comes in and puts his arms around mother and grins at her—say—I bet that's worth a million dollars to her. She just looks at Jimmy and her eyes get all full. They seem to shout: 'You're my very own. My son!' I can imagine how she feels. She thinks Jimmy is the grandest thing on the earth."

Chickie said with her heart stabbing: "Oh, Mary, you're in love with Edward McPike."

"Yes, I love him."

Chickie wanted to press her face against Mary's arm. She tried to hold back the swift tears that all at once rushed through her. Oh, she loved Mary as though Mary were her own sister. From the time they were eight or nine they had been chums. Now Mary spoke this aching thing; now Mary was going to step into warping drudgery like Lucy's. And all their bright, happy companionship was ended.

And this clumsy Edward McPike could do this to Mary—

Chickie was suddenly remembering the wondrous romances she and Mary had weaved together. How they would each marry some one handsome—some one with just a little money. And they would have bungalows near together with garages and gardens. They would go on picnics together. . . .

Oh—there would be none of that now. . . . Mary would have to pinch; she would look for a cheap flat—buy furniture on the installment plan. . . . Oh, it was a shame.

Suddenly she felt Mary's trembling hand; Mary's nervous words, "Oh, I know what you're thinking about, Chickie. But you don't know. You can't judge things by the outside. You can't ever know what Edward is, Chickie. He has a soul. I can't tell you how I feel."

Chickie was almost in tears. "Yes, yes—then you are going to marry Edward?"

"Soon."

"Oh, you'll have it hard like Lucy."

Mary's face grew tense. "I don't care. I won't. Anyway, I'd like to suffer for Edward. I love him like that. That's what love means. . . . Oh, Chickie, it's like the whole world bursting all at once into flower. I want to laugh and cry and, oh, I don't know what to do—I feel all melting sometimes. . . ."

A week after this Mary said to Chickie: "Edward is going away. He wants me to marry him and go, too. So I will. We won't have any wedding—only you and Jimmy and mother—"

"When?"

"Tuesday."

"So soon? And not in a veil—oh, Mary—"

"Those things don't count. . . ."

They went at twilight to the little church. Jimmy and Chickie were inside, waiting before the small altar. Chickie's

heart thumped with a curious pain. Her eyes kept brimming.

Jimmy watched her with an intent, eager glance. Abruptly he stepped behind, reached down and pressed her hand. His own was like ice. She heard his voice, so hoarse it frightened her.

"Chickie—say, Chickie—if it was only you and I!"

Her heart twisted with the shock. Jimmy's head was lowered. She could feel his breath.

"Chickie, I wish we were getting married. Could we?"

He held her hand so hard as though he would hold her soul, too. She said, "Jimmy—why—oh—"

She saw his white face and his dear boy's mouth—that it had an awful look of pain. She answered, pretending to laugh.

"Ho—got the ring, Jimmy darling?"

He turned his back sharply.

Mary came. She wore two beautiful orchids. Her dark face had a high, proud look of haunting sweetness.

At the words "for better or worse" Chickie saw her eyes close, her breath pause. She heard her answer with a quiet exaltation, "For better or worse."

Jimmy heard it, too.

He walked down the aisle with Chickie, walked slowly, tightening his hand on her arm, so that she must keep pace with him. Edward and Mary reached the vestibule.

They were but halfway down the aisle. Jimmy stopped her. He leaned down and said, pleading, "Chickie, I love you like that—like Mary loves. Why don't you take me?"

And his face was near to hers and all alive with a white, pleading tenderness. His eyes held her. As long as she lived she remembered that asking look, terrible in its humility—like a prayer in Jimmy's dear, honest eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

MARY'S RETURN

SHE felt all through her little melting shivers as though warm, live tears poured in a bath over her. She tried to look bravely in Jimmy's eyes—she tried to laugh. After a long struggle she said, "Oh, Jimmy—"

She wanted to tell him she loved him—oh, ever so much. But this? Why, she never dreamed—never once had the faintest thought—

She put up her hand and pressed the tears back into her eyes.

And suddenly she heard him laughing softly; his hand friendly again—not all hard pressing on hers.

"Don't look so tragic, Chickie; we won't hang you to-day. Come on, now—call me darling Jimmy and I'll take the rope off your neck."

That night he said quietly: "Don't trouble over what I said, Chickie—though I don't see why you shouldn't love me some day. Perhaps if I go away for a while. . . ."

"Oh, no. Don't do that, Jimmy. It's not that I don't love you. Why, I love you like anything. Oh, I think you're the darlinest fellow in the world—but I never dreamed—"

"I get you, Chickie. But that's all right. Maybe in a year, if I make myself scarce. Anyway, Chickie, you have no idea how much I'd do for you. I bet you'd be the happiest thing. Nobody else could love you as I do—why, for the last six years I've just been waiting to tell you. You know, Chickie—no matter how sore I got at the world, if I heard you laughing in the kitchen with Mary or if I saw you coming up the garden—gosh—I felt like the whole darn works just up and sang—"

"And I'm not too old for you, Chickie. Six years isn't so much, and you need an older fellow—"

They were sitting on the davenport in the little living-room. In the front garden Jennie was hosing her plants. Through the open door they could hear her puttering about.

Chickie kept her head down. She knew Jimmy's face was all

excited again. She said, "Oh, Jimmy darling, this is awful sad."

He moved closer to her—took her hand gently: "Don't look like that, Chickie—gee, you poor little kid—I won't say another word, only look up and laugh."

So she did, but when Jimmy left, she went softly down the hall to her own room, and sat at the window looking into the back yard where Jennie's roses were all in bloom. She thought of Mary and all their sweet, long years together. Mary gone—but she thought beyond this of Jimmy and the queer look of pain in Jimmy's eyes. She kept seeing that.

Jonathan found her there in the dark—put his long sinewy arm about her. Then he knew that she was crying. He laughed at her, "Chickie, girl, you wouldn't really want Mary to turn old maid, would you? Now don't go spoiling your pretty eyes for nothing."

She didn't tell him it was for Jimmy she cried. She wouldn't tell that to Jonathan. Not for worlds. Deep in her heart she knew that he would have given her gladly—yes, Jonathan would have given her, his Chickie, gladly to Jimmy. So she wouldn't let him know—nor Jennie either.

It was so lonesome now. For days she went about with a forlorn quiet weighing on her heart. It was as though some one she dearly loved had died.

She wondered if Jimmy would not bother dropping in any more. And they would never go to the Orpheum together again.

When the Tuesday night they always went to the show came, Jimmy was waiting as she got off the car coming from work. He caught her arm, pinched it hard and laughed right in her face. "See here, you conceited little nut! I'm not hanging on a sour apple tree—not yet! Don't think you're getting away with this 'touch me not I'll melt' stuff! Be ready at seven-thirty. I have no car fare, so you'll walk."

Just as it always had been—darling old Jimmy again—nice, grown-up Jimmy, and she could tell him all her troubles and ask his advice.

One night he said, "Did mother tell you? Mary sent a wire to-day. She's coming back. They're leaving at once. The drug company's offered Edward a great job—"

She stood stock-still in the middle of the street. Why, that was like the moon coming down and kissing her, so wild it

made her feel with joy. She hugged his arm; she burst out laughing, saying, "Jimmy darling—darling—darling—when—oh—"

His face grew white. "You wouldn't feel like this for me, Chickie?"

She closed her eyes hard.

When Mary came they threw their arms about each other. They cried and then they laughed. And for a while were closer to each other than before.

It was wonderful—the change in Mary—all the snappy discontent gone—that high look of sweetness on her face. She moved about the little flat they took on Dolores Street like a young, ardent priestess all aglow with joy.

Nearly every afternoon Chickie ran in on her way home. Mary was wearing her soft, brown hair parted in the middle now and drawn quaintly half over her ears. This gave her dark face a chaste, quiet air that made Chickie think of gentle madonnas. She watched Mary arranging flowers on a snowy table with graceful tenderness—and, remembering this same Mary flouncing down the napkins and the peppers and salts when she used to set the table in the old home, Chickie burst out laughing:

"Mary, you're all like prunes and prisms now."

"You mean with my hair parted? Edward likes it."

"Oh, Mary! Quoting Edward already. I suppose you'd hang a wart to the top of your nose if sweet Edward liked it."

"I'll laugh at you, yet, Chickie."

"Oh, my, yes! When pickles grow on a rose!"

"That is what I used to think. And all the while I was only waiting for Edward to come. That's what you're waiting for, too, Chickie."

"Not if I know it!"

"You do know it. Every time you see a man who strikes you as stunning, you begin to wonder, 'Is he the one?'"

Chickie flushed. Walking home slowly, this picture of Mary radiant in the little white kitchen kept flashing like a warm, happy smile. But, instead of Mary setting out the dainty blue dishes in the cozy breakfast nook, it was Chickie. Instead of Edward whistling through the hall, it was some one tall, with black hair straight across his forehead—not Jimmy, of course—but some one full of grins and big like Jimmy was. Dreaming this, her step hurried, grew light. She laughed, glancing

about warily lest some one perceive the shy, bright exuberance wherein she walked.

In the beginning nothing marred this picture. When the four of them went out together, people looked at them, because they laughed with such a careless glee. Old people—people about 30 or so—wondered what these young fools found so delicious and so comical in life.

It didn't last. There came a night when Mary wouldn't go to the show, though Jimmy had the four tickets. This happened twice. Chickie, dropping in one afternoon, urged impatiently: "Oh, why don't you come, Mary—why, you just want to stick around here and do nothing!"

Mary had drawn a chair over to the sink and was sitting there heavily, slicing tomatoes for a salad.

"Please come, Mary. If you're going to begin and spoil everything—"

Mary's face turned scarlet. "I would—I'd love to. I just don't feel equal—"

"Not equal to going to a show." Then Chickie stopped, for Mary's eyes had suddenly filled. Her lips were trembling. Chickie stood there and stared. All at once her heart began to pound—pound madly—sent a queer hotness stifling through her.

She saw Mary's eye assenting and she whispered, frightened, "Oh, Mary, so soon," and couldn't say another word because her throat got dry and tight.

Mary laughed nervously, took up her knife. "I thought you guessed it long ago. It's not so soon. Why, don't stand there crying about it! I'm glad!"

For a long while Chickie couldn't speak. Then she came over and learned on the sinkboard. "Honestly, are you glad, Mary? Oh, I can't believe that."

"Well, you don't know, Chickie. But I mean it—it may seem hard and all that—I don't care—"

Chickie could see a strained white line about Mary's lips. Her own heart felt like that. She managed to say, with a little high-pitched laugh, "Oh, well; then it's all right, I suppose." But she found it hard to breathe. She wanted to hurry away—not to look at Mary.

Coming to her own steps, she had to blink sharply—make her eyes steady.

So Mary didn't go out with them any more. Chickie found

her in the late afternoons sitting in the living room, her feet on a chair, the sun streaming over her shoulders. She read a great deal—books that Edward brought.

"I love to sit here and dream," she said, folding her hands as though she never intended to stir again.

Chickie was weighted down with Mary's impassive quietude. Often when she found Mary moving about with such heavy effort she said, "Oh, sit here, Mary, I'll throw the things on the stove." And she dashed about getting Mary's dinner, feeling a wild free joy in her own swiftness—her quick, lightsome feet.

She went home, winged, exulting in each buoyant, elastic step. Oh, it was good to be dashing along light and slim like this—free as the sweet, breezing air. She no longer dreamed of herself setting blue dishes on a table for two.

Jimmy brought her back with a wrench to deeper thoughts. He came over one night in a high state of suppressed excitement. He blurted out: "What do you think, Chickie—I'm off to Honolulu—"

"Honolulu?" She stared at him and a pang caught her heart. "Not for good. Oh—"

He was standing, holding her hands, looking into her face.

"No—they're putting up a new cannery—I'm going down to give it the once over. Say, that's a trip. Chickie—a whole month there—say, what about it—well—"

He waited—waited with his eyes pulling her like hooks.

Her lips began to twitch. Jimmy dropped her hands.

"Well—" he said, with his back half turned, "I'll—I'll come in again—" He went hurrying down the hall. She stood motionless. It seemed as though her pulses all were stilled.

Jimmy closed the door softly. She felt that a moment holy and terrible had come to her. It was passed now and might never come like that again.

CHAPTER IX

ON THE NEW ROAD

JIMMY was the first man who ever asked her to marry him. She let him go away; let the door close softly.

Yet, even as the still hush dropped on her heart she heard in its depths a low singing like the ripple of a woodland stream. Some one loved her—ah—loved her so well it made his face all white. Loved her—Chickie—like that.

The elfin joy kept murmuring, awakened in her a serene, blithe self-assurance. Jimmy loved her and Jimmy was a big, fine fellow, better than nearly any man she knew.

Unconsciously she was thinking this; unconsciously she was comparing others—all the men who came into the office—with Jimmy. Oh—they weren't as tall, nor as quick, nor anything like Jimmy was.

It used to be that when these men stopped at her desk her face would flood with color; her hands fidget. Janina would mock afterward.

Now she glanced at them quietly. Now, when they asked her to go out, she was not dumb with awe as she had been with Harry Lewis. She thought to herself with a gay flippancy, "Oh, who are you! Little cricket! Look at Jimmy!"

It gave a happy dash to all her winsome caprice. Janina noticed, "Glad to see you picking up, baby. Not above taking the tips after all, eh?"

It was like a spattering of dirty water on a sheer, white dress. Chickie answered airily: "Ho! You'd like to know my hidden charm? Come around some night after dark, Janina. I'll give you two and a half ounces of my own secret potion—guaranteed deadly. No man may quaff and survive!"

"Thanks, baby. Don't get the fat head. You'll need the whole dose yourself. Besides, I've lots more in the chest where that came from. What does dear papa have to say now that you're stepping out nights?"

Chickie winced. She could feel Janina's hand as though it ripped in and tore a bit of flesh from her heart. She answered, "Nothing that you could understand, Janina!"

Yet Jonathan was a sore problem. He had such a way of following her with his eyes from the moment she stepped into the house. When she was going out he grew silent. As she kissed him good-by he held her hand—often for a minute or two, and kept his head lowered. She couldn't bear that. She wanted, sometimes, to throw off her hat, to say, bitterly, "Oh, all right, then—I'll stay home forever!"

Because of Jonathan she sometimes made no dates for a whole week at a time. He went about chuckling—full of young spirit. He read his paper, then put out his hands, showing the long, tough nails, insisting that she manicure them—shine them up pink like her own. He lay back in his big leather chair, exulting. . . .

"Isn't this great, Chickie, girl. Now, aren't you happy? I wish—"

"Yes—you selfish old Jonathan—you wish your little sweetness had no feet and no eyes and no senses at all, but was just a big lob of jelly to sit here content, night after night. Now, honestly, cutie-love, do you think that's a bit fair in you?"

He gave a snap whether it was fair or not! There she was—there he wanted her. He laughed: "But what about your old dad and little Jennie alone so much?"

It always made her want to cry when he talked like this; it took the joy out of things.

And she was lonely enough with Jimmy gone and Mary married. Twice after Jimmy's return he asked her to go out. Each time, as it happened, she had the evening promised. For a long while he didn't drop in or ask again.

Then Mary's son was born. Her whole thought and all her soul were just poured out on that helpless little bundle, on that wrinkled, funny little thing, so out of shape in Chickie's eyes, so soft and perfect in Mary's. Chickie couldn't spend all her evenings watching over little James Edward McPike.

Why shouldn't Jonathan want her to see the good shows—dance once or twice a week? Just sweet, harmless things like that. She wanted no vivid adventures, as Janina told with such a crimson tongue.

She could often have gone out with a crowd—stayed till the drab, gray morning broke. Other girls in the office did that. Chickie had not even a wish for it.

Until one day a startling thing happened.

Chickie worked in a towering building in California Street. Across the little alley was a companion building. Chickie's desk was near the window. In her idle moments she used to watch the girls in these other offices.

There was one with bushy hair like a Fiji Islander. She spent every available moment feverishly rubbing a buffer over her nails. Another, with thin, curved shoulders and a hungry, avaricious way of pounding her typewriter, was riveted to her desk—never turned her eyes.

It was the superb, luxurious creature with all the empty grandeur of a movie queen who fascinated Chickie. She never seemed to do any work, but sat with her feet on the radiator, a magazine in her lap. Two or three times she caught Chickie's stare and returned for it a most enchanting smile.

One day, as Chickie watched the movie girl, there stood at an adjoining window a man—a young man—tall—with a beautifully sculptured head. He had a penknife in his hand and was slowly paring his finger nails. He stared over and grinned. Chickie was suddenly aware that he had been looking at her and she looking at him for many seconds. She flushed crimson, turning abruptly to her desk.

Her hands trembled on the typewriter keys. She felt drawn mightily, as by some electric current, to that opposite window. She could see the young face, alight with careless mirth—red hair—thick—brushed back—

For an hour she fought against the impulse to look again. Then she took a little sidelong glance. From out the shadow of the room a tall form defined itself. The young man stood at the window.

Tremors of excitement went tingling over her—little swift waves of fire. He stood there and waited as though she had called and he was merely answering. Then he laughed, and there was something boyish and full of lark in the light that seemed to glance about him. She wanted to laugh, too—to call out gayly, "Hello, Redhead."

She had read a story once of a girl in a boarding house watching a young man in a studio across the street. The young man was an artist—a lonely fellow. When he became aware of the girl's interest it made him glad, like sun streaming into a solitary house. That was a beautiful story—all full of love. So sparkling the way they got acquainted and had such joyous times together.

Chickie imagined herself the girl in the story. She wondered about the young man—weaved dreams about him.

But for two days after this first encounter she kept her eyes from wandering across the alley. Deep in her work one afternoon there came a sharp bang that made her look up quickly. Across the street, the window of romance had been rattled down and now was rattled up. There in the window, laughing at her, was the red-haired young man. Before she was aware her lips opened with a rush of bubbling happiness.

Yet several times they passed each other on the street. Chickie looked straight ahead. She felt the blood racing to her cheeks, her heart leaping.

One soft afternoon in late September, a sudden breeze whisking through the open window lifted her papers, scattering them in a whirlwind all about the floor. As she stooped to pick them up the phone at her desk rang. A deep, rollicking voice offered, "Oh, I'll come over and gather them up if you like."

She knew at once that it was he. Then he was at the window, the phone in his hand. She put up the receiver quickly, but not before Janina had seen.

She passed Chickie's desk, giving her a wink: "Into the dressing room, woman!"

When Chickie followed, Janina's eyes sparkled. "A wild case on the delightful red head, haven't we?"

"Oh, you have men on the brain, Janina!"

"Good place to keep them, baby! Guaranteed harmless until we let them move out of our heads and into our hearts. Too bad when you have more room downstairs than up! Like to meet our good young friend?"

"What do you mean?"

"That you've been throwing your eyes and heaven knows what else across the alley for the last six weeks. Well—I shouldn't be surprised if he's just the man for you! I'll arrange it."

CHAPTER X

JAKE'S INVITATION

"MAKE a match for yourself, Janina. I think I can arrange my own."

"Who said anything about a match, little one? Matches are out of date in this day and age. Time was when a girl went under the yoke, now she jumps over the bars!"

"I hope you land on your feet, Janina, and not in the ditch."

Janina gave a little singing laugh: "Ah—ha-ha—my pretty one grows clever. I could answer your wish, baby—but more about that anon! What are you doing to-night?"

"Nothing much."

"No? Well, you're going to be doing the biggest thing you've ever done in your life." Janina's vivid face sharpened. "Happen to remember a rather good-looking fellow I introduced you to some months ago—fellow named Jake?"

Chickie shot a quick, excited glance at Janina's face. Jake Munson? Did she remember that flashing, kingly presence moving toward her in Montgomery Street—stopping with that delightful smile?

She said, holding down her eagerness: "What about it?"

"Jake's giving a little party to-night. He has a notion that a shrinking violet in his buttonhole would be so fetching!" Janina's tone curled upward mockingly. "He wants you to come."

Chickie stood at the window looking far out to the tranquil blue of the waters. She was suddenly hot and trembling. She felt Janina fearfully—like an animal in the small room—like a panther straining at some invisible leash.

She said slowly: "Why are you asking me, Janina?"

As she said it, she was poignantly aware of Janina's hands, soft, incredibly white, turned back sensuously at the finger tips. They were clenched now. Little streams of red moved upward slowly on either side of Janina's throat.

She seemed tightened by some invisible spring. She backed to the door, fastened both hands on the knob.

"Jake wants to meet you and he will. He's been after me

for months. You might as well come to-night. It's going to be sweet and pure. We'll get you home by ten-thirty."

"I don't know—well, it's kind in you, Janina, but—"

Janina put her arm with a quick impulse in Chickie's. "Yes, come. You might just as well—because Jake will meet you somehow. Besides, I think I'll have a surprise for you—a good one. We'll call for you around seven-thirty."

"I don't think, Janina—"

"That's right. Don't think! You've been a fool long enough! This is a children's party Jake's giving to-night. There'll be chaperons along—how's that for one who loves antiques?"

Then softly in Chickie's ear: "But don't pull the frigid stuff too strong, baby. Leave the ice for mother's cottage pudding!"

"Keep your advice, Janina! I may not—"

"Don't stall, Chickie! You know you're thrilled speechless—you know you are planning already what you'll wear. . . . There'll only be six or seven—a little dance. We may even go to the Palace—"

"Oh, well—"

"You're on!"

Chickie answered slowly: "I suppose it will be fun—all right!"

Immediately she was in a quiver—hot, uncertain. Perhaps she shouldn't—

But she left the office in a hurry Saturday afternoon. She would wear the new maroon crêpe dress. She would rush out now and buy a pair of slippers.

When the clerk brought out black satin pumps with little straps going off oddly at the side, she grew excited. Wonderful—how stunning she would look.

She was to meet Mary at 2 o'clock. Mary wanted a suit—an inexpensive one to tide her over till the baby was a little older—till she was thin again.

There was half an hour to wait. She went restlessly through the shops, stopping abruptly at a hosiery counter—beautiful, sheer things of chiffon . . .

The salesgirl showed her a pair. Just what she needed to complete her outfit. She was afraid to ask the price. The girl ran her hand through them: "Lovely weave, isn't it? Five and a half."

Chickie opened her purse: "I'll take them."

The package felt like a sin in her hands. She thought, with panic, "Why did I do that?"

Feverishly her thought ran back to Janina. She stood still in the middle of the street, saying almost aloud, "Why did she ask me?"

Chickie knew that Janina was in love with Jake Munson—pitifully in love with him. Why should she ask another to the party? She remembered the day Jake had stopped her for a chat—remembered the kind, rich look in his eyes . . .

Why not! Why shouldn't she go?

By the time she met Mary her eyes were glowing. Mary looked at her with a little touch of envy: "Heavens, Chickie, you get thinner every day. Look at me. Sometimes I could cry . . ."

"But you have little Edward!"

"Yes—well—but I can still see myself in the mirror. He laughed to-day—honestly. He recognizes me. I have to hurry. I have to get shoes and a bonnet and a little sacque . . ."

She went rambling on—Chickie only half listening. She kept thinking to herself, "I have a right to go. Any one would"—suddenly she turned to Mary:

"Do you remember that Jake Munson?"

"Who—that big handsome fellow?"

"Yes—I'm going out with him to-night—"

Mary's fingers dug into hers—the way they did when she got all tightened with excitement. She stared at Chickie incredulously. She said quietly: "How does this happen?"

Chickie told her swiftly. "Do you think I should go, Mary?"

"Well—well—why shouldn't you? I don't see why not. Maybe he's in love with you. Great heavens! Imagine that!"

"Don't be an idiot, Mary—like all the married people making matches. I don't know—I'm kind of nervous . . ."

"It can't hurt you to go. You're nobody's fool, are you? Oh, Chickie—you might as well take a few pleasures while you can. You'll be settling down. It's in the cards for you."

Mary smiled wistfully! "It wouldn't surprise me a bit if that man marries you within a month. He's old, isn't he—you're just the type a man like that falls for. Chickie, don't get married till I can pour myself into a slim gown . . . wouldn't we have the fun—"

It was so delicious to hear Mary talk aimlessly like this.

Chickie said with a gulp: "Oh—you look at things so easily—"

"You know why, Chickie! Because there's really nothing to fear from Life. That's one thing I've found out. Nothing that you need fear—"

Mary's opinion was like a sanction. Of course, she should go—nothing for her to fear—

Yet she kept thinking of Janina's words: "Don't be a fool all your life. Leave the ice in the refrigerator!" She tossed her head, brushing aside the vague insinuations. They flew back into her mind, twittering there, restless, alert. She felt her breath heated; her heart swelled out—half bursting.

As she got off the car, Jimmy met her. He walked to the door, stood awkwardly as though he had something vital that he must say, yet remained silent, his eyes reaching out to her like gestures pleading.

She laughed uneasily: "Jimmy, old darling, why so mournful?"

"Say—say, Chickie, aren't we ever going out together again?"

"Well, I like that? Is this a throw down cold, Jimmy, old love?"

"Then how about to-night? Why don't you come out with me to-night?"

"Oh, you always ask me the wrong time. I can't to-night. To-morrow or Monday—any other night—" She wouldn't meet the hurt, eager look of him.

She went into the house half ready to cry. She would ring up that Janina—break her old date—

She paused. She went into her room and stealthily took out the new maroon crêpe dress—took out tenderly a long string of crystal beads.

She was excited again. She would go. She would look beautiful—more radiant than any one ever dreamed.

CHAPTER XI

THE VIGIL

FROM across the small table Jonathan watched her. It made little shivers of anxiety run into her throat. He might begin to ask questions. Where was she going? Who was taking her?

In the kitchen she heard the clink of glasses. Jennie was bringing in the pudding. Oh, Jennie was so slow to-night; Chickie glanced at her wrist watch.

Jonathan saw that. He reached over and took her hand, staring at the nails that shone like little pink mirrors.

Chickie felt his kind eyes. She knew that they were pleading. She wouldn't look at them. She ran her fingers back and forth over his great hard palm.

He said softly: "Not going out again to-night, Chickie?"

She felt suddenly as though she would like to cover her face with his big hands and cry. But she tossed her head. "Again? Why, Jonathan, what do you mean? You want your own blessed darling to be a hermit?"

With a little nervous laugh she jumped up and ran from the room.

Standing at the foot of the bed, she saw through a haze the new dress. A trembling passed over her, expectant, uneasy, like a pulse of guilt.

Suddenly she tossed her head with an impatient "What is the matter with me!" She began hurriedly to dress.

Her face in the mirror gave her a little stab of frightened joy. The dark maroon silk threw a soft flush over her beautiful white skin and that drape to one side made her look tall and very slender. Her heart swelled with pride.

Then, with a catch in her heart, she remembered Janina's warning. Even to her milky throat grew scarlet. She turned hastily from the mirror. Jennie's ample form was framed in the door. "Oh, nearly ready, dear?"

She came over all rosy with pride and gave little loving touches here and there about the skirt. "There, now," she whispered. "Well, I think it's just perfect."

In a breathless hurry, Chickie ran in and stood before her father. He took her hand, patting it in an absent way. "I wish you'd stay home once in a while, Chickie."

"Oh, Jonathan!" Tears crept into Chickie's eyes. "Why, ever since last year; ever since Mary went and got married, I've just about turned yellow like the wall from staying in so much."

Jonathan had no chuckle in him. He said heavily: "I haven't noticed it, Chickie."

She ran her fingers nervously over his hair, pinching his mustache the way he loved so. "It's only Summer once, cutie love!"

Yet for all her soft young beauty drifting about him like a breath from his own springtime, Jonathan persisted: "Listen, Chickie, get home by twelve. That's late enough."

"Twelve to-morrow? Oh, my, yes!"

"But I mean it, Chickie."

She gave a little trembly laugh and whispered in his ear, using unconsciously Janina's words: "Jonathan, old darling, want me to be a fool all my life?"

He sat bolt upright as though a knife turned in his flesh. But Chickie's lips were soft on his eyes, his grizzled forehead. She whispered gayly: "Hurry, you little old He-Pandora—kiss your angel child good-by!"

A gay, nervous laugh. She was gone.

It was a light passing from the house.

Jonathan sat with his hands clasped; an old man, a man suddenly emptied of life. He sat there a long while. Abruptly, he got up and hurried to the door. He walked out on the steps, looking up and down the street. The car that had taken Chickie was long out of sight.

He went back to the room. He opened the evening newspaper. He held it stiffly before him.

Jennie, deep in a little squat chair, smiled gently and rocked. Echoes of song murmured within her. She was a girl again—she was Chickie tasting anew the dear, lost sweetness of youth. Absently she took off her spectacles and wiped her eyes. In the quiet house, a few moments ago so crowded with youth and color, Jennie's sigh trembled.

"Our Chickie is beautiful."

No answer.

Then, after a long time, with a gruffness that startled her: "She goes out too much."

Jennie sat forward, nervously taking the glasses from her nose, nervously putting them back again. "Why, Jonathan. But at nineteen——"

"Yes, yes, nineteen! I know all that! Nineteen! The truth is we let Chickie run away with us."

He saw Jennie's lips quiver; he saw her face pucker up. He hid the sight from him with his hand pressed against his forehead.

After a long while, he said in a hushed, imploring tone as though he wished her to contradict: "Jennie, I could swear I smelt tobacco on Chickie's breath last night."

The silence throbbed as though something ran between them, cowering. Jennie's face grew ashen; she was unable to speak.

Without looking at her, Jonathan beseeched: "Does she, Jennie? Does Chickie smoke?"

"Well, well——"

"But does she? Just answer that."

"Ah—yes, she does—a little——"

He turned his white face from her.

The mother, with one of Chickie's silk stockings poised in her hand, felt her heart bound. The needle slipped, going deep under the nail of her finger. It bled. Tears of sick agitation trickled down her cheeks.

All the bright joy of an hour ago was gone. Coldness touched her. Little torments bit with sharp teeth at her breast.

Chickie—and Jonathan looking like that—ah, dear God—

She went over and touched his arm. At first he didn't look at her—at first she couldn't speak. Then she saw his eyes screwing together, but wet, just the same in the corners.

She found it in her heart to laugh softly. "Ah, Jonathan—at nineteen—why, I can remember so many things—we should thank God—we should be on our knees."

He slid his hand upward to his face—

Jennie smiled. "The idea! Why, didn't you say yourself it's not like when we were young. Why—there's no more harm in Chickie's smoking—" She went rushing on—eager—her lips shaking.

He lifted questioning eyes full into hers. "It's not the smok-

ing, Jennie. It's where the smoking and all this going about end—"

Oh!—the pain of that—but he went on mercilessly: "Jennie, do we even know who Chickie is with?"

Yes! Oh, she knew!

In her relief Jennie repeated Chickie's excited confidence.

"A Mr. Munson. A very fine man. He owns a big business. Chickie knows all about him. He's very well known."

Chickie had added excitedly: "Oh, mother, darling, the girls are all wild about him. You never saw anything so handsome! Can you believe it—he's been wanting to meet me for months."

Jennie raised her head exultantly. Could she believe that! Why, it was incredible to her that any one should look at Chickie and not adore her. Even thinking of Chickie made her veins glow, made her say now aloud:

"Jonathan, we should be ashamed to talk so! Our own child—"

He shifted uneasily.

Yet that night he was the one to fall asleep. Jennie lay wide awake, a chill creeping round and round the edge of her heart.

The clock in the dining room struck. It was a cold little hammer knocking in her throat . . .

Half asleep he asked, "Chickie home yet?"

"Why, it's early! She couldn't be here yet."

Asleep again. The deep monotony of his breathing struck her with a curious wonder. Ah—but she, Jennie, couldn't sleep.

The cars whizzed down Twenty-fourth Street and went grinding at the turn. They stopped.

Growing late. Silence thickened, pressed down like dead hands, heavy and cold.

The clock struck one. Just one this time. Jennie's brain echoed, "One! One o'clock! One already!"

She slipped from the bed, wrapped the old pink worsted shawl about her, felt cautiously down the hall to the living room. She turned back the window shade, peeking through the narrow crack.

Street empty, wind hollering through alleyways, rushing torn bits of paper about the lamp-post. Then a couple sauntering arm in arm, leisurely, as though time had forgotten to pass.

An automobile honked. Jennie's hands tightened on the shade. The machine went skimming past.

Jimmy, swinging around the corner, hurried past. She watched him with gentle eyes—that dear boy, Jimmy.

Gone—a bleak loneliness in the street . . . a chill whispering. She tightened the shawl about her, rubbed her cold feet one against the other.

But she stood there, holding fast to the curtain, peering through the crack. Half past one and then it was two.

She was afraid to go back to bed. And she was wild with terror lest Jonathan awaken. It was two o'clock and Chickie had not come.

CHAPTER XII

TWO MEN

It began happily—a bright river of joy lapping at her feet.

In the limousine she sat in front with Jake Munson. He greeted her exuberantly: "So we have little Rachel with us, after all. We woo her seven years and at last we get a smile." His laugh came deeply, as from a joyous spring within. She could see the flash of white, even teeth.

As they sped through the park the slender trees sprang open, making a sharp white road, swept by the moon. Out and out—silver foam on the waters—lights like stars—

Beauty and luxury—she sank down in the soft cushions. She closed her eyes happily, thinking: "I hope it's Tait's." She had never been there.

They swerved into an enchanted garden. They stepped into the glowing heart of color and music.

Chickie held back a sigh of rapture. Her eyes passed with an exquisite thrill from the warm hangings and the lamps to the wide stairways; from this to the careless, brilliant forms swaying in the dance. Life—charming and beautiful, just as she had dreamed.

They waited as the men checked their hats. Beside Janina there was another girl, tall, tailor made, with a clean, brushed back look. This was Ida Larkin. She wore black spangles, cut severe, queenly. On each forefinger she had an immense ring of black onyx. Very otherwise, Chickie thought it.

Janina, too, was in black, with a daring orange feather caught in the girdle below the waist. Striking—too brilliant and intelligent—Janina looked to-night. She touched Chickie lightly on the arm—ran her fingers over Chickie's skin:

"Well—glad you're here?"

"Oh, love it!"

"Of course. New dress. Look angelic. All dolled even to the shoes. Huh—all alike, aren't we! All slaves when a fellow like Jake snaps his fingers!"

Chickie's eyes kept up their smile; her lips parted. She was afraid to speak—afraid of the tickling at her throat. Janina

laughed—soft, biting. She said, with her eyes mocking, "I'll say they're worth it."

The men were coming over. Jake was smiling—at her. He towered over the others. Ida Larkin's husband—a slight, very natty man, and the other—dumpy, rotund little fellow with merry eyes, red face, half bald. They called him "Nicky." Every one was very affectionate to Nicky. In return he dispensed favors and smiles without discrimination.

Nicky, as it happened, was one of those agreeable, sociable old bachelors who fight shy of marriage all their lives—more persistently than other men—and in escaping capture by one woman, they are used, abused, petted and laughed at by all the rest. He went wagging along now at the side of Jake.

Chickie wondered if he was to be her partner. Old fellow of forty. She felt a little twinge of contempt. Then Jake offered his arm. He bent his head, giving a low sound, half laugh, half challenge, "Now for fun and frolic!"

She remembered the song from the "Merry Widow." She had seen the play. This Jake Munson, with his magnificent presence, his vital, animal joy in life, reminded her of the prince.

As they entered the dining-room the comparison became vivid. He walked in like a king, head thrown back, black eyes and scarlet lips all flashing. He was greeted like a king. At half a dozen tables the faces of women lighted up; men bowed as though proud to be acknowledged by this great, splendid fellow.

Chickie's pulse beat rapidly with elation. She forgot Janina and her mean, degrading taunt. She walked through an atmosphere that glittered; drew in breaths that sparkled. She felt herself charged as though electric shocks were mildly and brightly darting through her.

"So your name is Chickie?" Munson, holding her chair, gave her a pleased, happy look as though she belonged to him and he wished every one in the room to know it.

"No! My name is Helen. It's only my father and people like that who call me 'Chickie.'"

"Then count me one of the 'people like that,' will you?"

"But they've all known me a long, long time."

"We'll know each other a long time, I promise you—longer than that."

Janina, sitting at Jake's left, leaned forward, pushing a small

cup toward him. "Fill it, Jake, but don't promise rashly. Chickie is young and innocent. She'll believe you. Remember, new violets every year, Jake!"

He gave her a quick, mocking glance, poured clear, golden liquor into her little cup. But he looked full at Chickie, saying, with his red lips laughing, "We drink to the one that is blooming to-night!"

He took a sip—passed the cup to Chickie. Janina's eyes flashed with a tense, hard eagerness. She watched and smiled.

Chickie raised the cup—tasted a sweet, velvet pungence; felt it go with soft, delightful fire through her.

"Now," said Jake, "we'll dance."

She glided through the rhythm, surprised at the wild brightness that sang in her heart. She was here. She had worried the whole afternoon and there was not a thing to worry about—just music—just sweet, sparkling gayety—

Jake hummed as he danced. At the foot of the stairs he stopped, looking down upon her glowing face: "You were never here before, Miss Bryce?"

"Who told you so?"

"Yourself. Let's wander upstairs, because I want you to tell me some other things. I want to know why you've kept me waiting nearly a year—"

He saw the quick misgiving in her hesitation; in her short question: "What is upstairs?"

His laugh rang out. "Oh—so Janina's been telling you I grab girls off the great highway and burn them at the stake, has she? Well, there's nothing upstairs but a corridor, a few card rooms and more dining rooms. Did she give me such a black eye as that?"

"Well—Janina believes all men are devils—so of course you couldn't be an exception. She thinks the only thing for a girl to do is to light a hotter fire quick. Burn men to cinders first! That's her belief."

"Is it yours?"

"No—you see, I've heard as how one man in every ten is an angel, and—"

"You're waiting for the tenth? Is it wings you want from life, Miss Bryce?"

"Well, I don't know, Mr. Munson, if I want wings exactly—but something shiny and beautiful—not like what other people get—"

There flashed before her Lucy and her drudgery; the plaintive humdrum of little Jennie's days. Now Mary, with her lithe, buoyant figure gone—Mary, in a bulky brown coat with a scant little beaver collar.

She leaned on the balcony looking into the brilliant room below. She sighed wistfully: "Why can't life be always beautiful like this?"

Jake saw the young, eager hunger in Chickie's parted lips. His eyes bent warmly with a smile to hers. "Is it beautiful to-night?"

"Yes."

"It can be beautiful like this for you, every night. For a girl like you—"

"Why for me?"

"The world loves to toss flowers under lovely feet."

"I haven't noticed it, Mr. Munson."

"You will. When you say you want something shiny and beautiful, do you mean money, clothes, automobiles?"

"I could use those things very nicely, but I'm not sure I want them first. I don't know—"

She did know. She was just then remembering the white flame that burned immortal in her thought; the flame young Arthur had first kindled on the hilltop when his lips had touched so lightly on hers; the flame Jimmy had a little touched.

How often even now in her imagination she watched sunsets with some magnificent other whose arm made a sweet hollow for her head.

Softly Jake Munson's hand covered hers. "You want love first? Love, Miss Bryce? That's the shiny and beautiful thing. It's the easiest of all to give."

He spoke with murmured tenderness and met a spark in Chickie's eyes. She said, glancing into his rich, expectant face: "No, it isn't, Mr. Munson, unless you mean the kind of love Janina always means."

"What kind is that?"

"The kind that doesn't pay."

"How do you know it doesn't pay?"

"Oh, I've watched other girls. They don't seem happy. They're always worried and scheming."

"And what is your kind of love, then, that pays so well?"

"I'm not sure, but when it comes I'll know it. It will be

something strong and glorious, like a great wind blowing on a mountain top—just sweep you clear into the clouds."

"Suppose it doesn't come?"

"It will. I've always believed life had some wonderful, big dazzling joy tucked away in her pocket for me—"

She stopped abruptly, her finger pointing to the room below, her breath rapid. "Who is that dancing with Janina? Oh, they see us—"

A laughing face stared into hers.

"Barry Dunne," Jake answered. "Nice boy. Oh—you know him?"

Her cheeks stained red like a shout of guilt. Janina and Barry Dunne were coming up the stairs. Janina said: "A surprise for you, Chickie. Like it?"

Chickie glanced into pleasant eyes—green, flecked with amber—the very eyes that had drawn her so mightily across the alley. The red-haired young man winked merrily: "The chasm is bridged at last, Miss Bryce."

CHAPTER XIII

THE PARTY

"TELL me, why did you give me the cold eye so long? Any other girl would have tumbled out that window long before this."

Barry Dunne danced most buoyantly—with a greater freedom than Jake. Chickie felt the ripple of his ardent youth, eager, like her own. He was young. She was young. That made it so much blither.

She thought of all the romances she had weaved about him, standing at the window. She laughed. "I suppose you're very attractive, Mr. Dunne?"

"Well, I'm not sure. When I was young and freckled-faced, and seventeen, I suffered agonies wondering just that very thing. I had a chum with black, curly hair—a regular ladies' man. Lord, I envied him. I thought girls hated red hair. I thought they found me a hideous brute. I tell you those were melancholy days. Then a year later my nose came down, the freckles all ran together, and a girl gave me the 'come hither' eye. That put the heart in me—the sweet thing—but a few black looks like you've treated me to undo all the good work. Why did you pass me up so stiffly when I smiled at you?"

"What should I have done? Flopped across the alleyway into your arms?"

"Then is it really true that you hate men and don't want a thing to do with them?"

"Did Janina say that about me?"

"She did, and more. I've added my own investigations. Now I can't understand why a girl would begrudge a lonely fellow a smile."

"Are you lonely?"

"I was—very—"

"Why, if I'd known that, I would have dropped any number of smiles. You know I had an idea you might be lonely like a man in a story I once read."

"And I had an idea you might be kind, perched up there with

seven stars in your hair like the Blessed Damozel. I thought you might call me up the golden stair."

"Indeed! And how could I when I didn't know your name? You wouldn't like it if I'd yelled out through the thin air, 'Hey, Redhead, come awn up!'"

Even the imaginary conversations she had invented with this most agreeable neighbor from across the way were not as full of elixir as this. She liked his eyes and the jaunty lift to his chin. When he gave her a quick, teasing look, like Jimmy's, it made her jubilant and quite at home. She said:

"Now what do you do down in that office? I've wondered if perhaps you're somebody important."

"Yes—very important—but young yet. I'm going to tell you all about it some day—"

They had to go back to the table. Jake Munson, his glass half raised, his beautiful teeth showing, recounted some intimate story to Janina. She sat with her long bare arms stretched before her. Her eyes and even her cheekbones glistened.

Jake rose hastily, his glance turned on Chickie warmly like an embrace. He pressed her hands with a fine gallant air, murmuring as though he had known her twice seven years, "How could you stay away so long, you dear! Leave me to the mercies of this black-eyed wench!"

Round the table there flowed now an easy mellow friendliness. Not Nicky alone, but every one was taken into the circle of affection. Bob Larkin, sharing his chair with a small, sleek brunette who kept taking sips from his glass and giving little inarticulate shrieks of delight, called over:

"Ah, there, Chickie meet Nana—a good kid, and she never weakens!"

Ida Larkin had lost a little of her clean cut, severe aspect. She beamed on the shiny faced Nicky. He had an arm about her waist and gazed into her eyes with fatuous devotion.

Janina, sharper, her face almost luminous in its vivid chiseling—made a place for Barry Dunne. Then she leaned back, behind Jake and, pulling Chickie's arm, whispered: "You're a wonder! You're going like lightning. Don't overdo it! Soft pedal, little one!"

Chickie felt a crimson stain rushing from her neck to her temples. Her heart hardened furiously against Janina. She kept her eyes down, bit her lips. Jake's shoulder inclined a

little toward her. He filled a glass and put it in her hand: "Losing heart, Chickie? Not tired already? You need a drink—won't hurt you—no chance to form a habit now."

No—she didn't want to drink this—she had taken the cocktail—a joyous thing—but she was a little afraid to try a second. She kept hearing things Jonathan had said. She didn't want it, anyway. She wanted just then to get up and run away.

She was overjoyed when Jake stood up and asked her to dance. They danced and danced. He seemed to know that she was all at once uneasy and trembling. He said with his rich exuberance: "Well, what did the black witch whisper in your ear? I may wring her neck one of these days."

"When you do, please let me come and give it a twist."

He brought up his full-throated laugh. "You dear! But why do you let her poison your mind, then?"

"I don't—I don't believe a word Janina says."

"Yes, you do. You let her put the fear of God in you against things you have no need to fear. Me, for example. Now, I want to know who is kinder than I. But you've taken lessons from Janina and you've concluded that you can only take a cross-eyed squint at all the pleasures of life. Then you've got to pick up your skirts and run. That's not so at all. I can give you other lessons, Chickie, and you'll see life for the fine, good thing it is."

"But you believe the same things as Janina does."

"Not much! Janina is always looking for the dregs in a cup; I only see the sparkle."

"But the dregs are there just the same."

"Yes. And leave them there. It's not our fault if Life can't brew the drink clear and faultless. At that, she's given us ingredients and plenty to make a pretty fine jolt for any one to swallow. Whether we like it or not, we've all got to put our lips to the cup."

"Oh—that's just what Mary said. We can't stop living because life may be hard."

"It may be hard for Mary—it never needs to be hard for Chickie—"

She laughed.

"Why did you laugh, then?"

"Because Mary used to think that very thing when she looked at her sister Lucy. And I suppose Lucy thought it when she saw how hard her mother found things."

"And I suppose," said Jake, with a long, quizzical look into Chickie's face, "that both Mary and Lucy asked figs from thistles. That's not fair to life. She'll give up the fruit, all right, but we've got to pluck the right tree. I'll teach you the way through the garden. How about that, Chickie?"

"I'm not quite sure what your way is. I think I'll take my own path."

"All right! I can follow as well as lead."

The others at the table were now standing. Nicky beckoned gayly, "Hurry up, Jake. We won't make it."

Janina, the sleek brunette, and Ida Larkin had their wraps. Jake said cozily, holding Chickie's coat, "We'll see which path is best."

"Where are we going?"

"On and on."

Janina had now turned Nicky over to Ida Larkin. She had appropriated Barry Dunne.

At the door Chickie looked back, wishing to hold all the brilliant details of hangings and color in her mind. Wouldn't Jennie just glow hearing all about it.

As they were waiting for Jake's car Barry Dunne said quickly: "You ride in the back with me, don't you? I was brought here on purpose for you."

"Oh!" said Chickie, with a little thrill of pleasure to find the young pleasant eyes on hers, "is that honest and true?"

But Jake helped her into the front seat, his shoulder hunched down cozily: "No one robs me right under my nose, eh, Chickie?"

A soft night breeze swept from the ocean with cool, delightful purity. The moon dropped a silver chalice on the waves. They sped through the park, opening its deep, mysterious silence with laughter and gay snatches of song.

Nicky poured out tune after tune, wagging his shiny, bald head like a fat puppy, saying after each song: "Another little chune, ladies? Another little drink? Come, now, let us lift up our voices in song!"

It was not yet eleven. "We are going to the Palace," Chickie was thinking. "Well—that won't be so late." She was nervous.

They darted downtown. At Kearny Street Bob Larkin flashed out his watch. "Get a move on, Jake! Three minutes!"

They passed the Palace; raced down Market.

The ferry—

“Good boy! Just on the dot!”

The machine rolled down the slip—into the boat—the whistle blasted.

Chickie turned a face pale with alarm to Jake Munson; the terror that leaped within her held her silent. After a long moment she asked: “Where are we going?”

He laughed. “More party, of course!”

“There’s a boat back?”

“Any number of them.”

She began to calculate. “Eleven—it will be half past when we get over there. I wonder what time the last boat comes back. Heaven—if we should miss it.” She saw Jonathan prowling through the hall; Jennie frantically rubbing her little hands together . . .

Sansalito loomed black—a mountain coming down to meet the sea. They took a sheer precipitous road winding through stately trees. They stopped before a high wall—a little house set back.

“And here we are!”

Chickie stole up to Janina. “What time is the last boat back?”

“All day to-morrow.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE FLIGHT

TREES arched above a wide porch. Through the leafy branches the bay gleamed, black, quiet. On a sudden the restless eye of Alcatrag flashed out: an eerie ghost on the waters.

Jake put his arm around Chickie's waist. She had a miserable feeling that she might cry.

"Isn't that beautiful? You won't want a finer sight than to see the dawn from this porch."

Without raising her eyes she murmured: "We'll make the last boat, won't we?"

"The last boat? You're not wanting to break away, are you?"

"Oh—it's not that—"

"Then why speak of home? No place like home, you know—after every place else is closed."

"My father may be worried."

"Yes? Well, go right in and phone. Tell him it's all O. K. Why should he worry?"

He switched on the lights. The porch was an arbor—white roses mounting to the roof. It opened on a deep, octagonal room, rugs of Chinese blue on the floor, the walls dark with reddish woods. Here and there a barbaric brilliance of color hung from the panels. Three or four steps led from this room to another with a mammoth black walnut sideboard.

"Mix the drinks, Red," Jake ordered, taking off Chickie's coat. "Don't let Nick put his flippers in it. The boy's fogged. I'm going down to get an ancient vintage."

And to Chickie: "I'll be up presently. Phone if you like, and make yourself to home."

Nicky put on the phonograph and, imagining himself a wood-nymph, came tripping down the room, waving his hands. He bowed, saying merrily: "Dance, Chickie, chick, chick?"

"I'm tired, Nicky." She turned her back quickly—saw, across the room, Nana—Nana on a low sofa, her slim legs crossed, was comfortably resting in Bob Larkin's arms. His

wife, helping Barry Dunne with the cocktails, appeared serenely unaware.

Janina sauntered over to Chickie. "Say, what's the matter?"

"I'm afraid we're going to miss the last boat."

"The last boat! What are you talking about?"

"If we miss it."

"What are you pulling off, Chickie? You knew what was up when we started for the ferry, didn't you?"

Chickie struggled with her aching breath. "Do you mean we won't get the last boat?"

Janina's face turned white. "Didn't Jake tell you? Didn't you hear us—all planning for to-morrow? Where in heaven were you? Hell's bells! Now I suppose papa'll say I've led you astray! We're not going home to-night!"

Laden pallor sucked the color from Chickie's skin. Janina tapped her foot impatiently. "Phone and tell them you missed the last boat. Tell them we're going yachting to-morrow—all over the bay. Lord! They can't expect you to miss that, can they? Do they want you to rot?"

When Chickie stood there speechless, pressing her finger into the corner of her eye, Janina bit her lips. "Come out of it, Chickie! Where do you get this mid-Victorian stuff anyway? They'll roar the first time, of course. They'll get used to it. You don't mean to say you'll miss that trip to-morrow, do you?"

She went down to the sideboard, where Red was vigorously shaking some mysterious concoction in a Mason jar. She spoke to him, shrugging, half angrily, toward Chickie. He handed her the jar and, filling a sherbet glass with a wonderful golden drink, came to Chickie. "Here's to the Blessed Damozel and the lilies in her hand."

She gave him a vague, misty smile, and smiling because she was so near to tears, looked into the glass. He pressed her hand softly. "What's the matter? Janina says you aren't happy. Why?"

"Are we really to stay here all night, Mr. Dunne?"

"Sure! Jake won't turn us out."

Her glass shook, the delicate liquor splattered on the beautiful maroon dress. He wiped it swiftly, dried her hands on his handkerchief and expecting a smile, saw her eyes suddenly fill, then close sharply.

"Now look here, Miss Bryce—why are you doing that?"

Putting her hand quickly in his, she said impulsively, "I have to get home. Oh, would you take me home?"

Without waiting for an answer she tore her coat from the chair. His face darkened.

"You want to go home? We couldn't make it."

With the tears running down her face she said, "Yes—if we run."

When he stood there hesitant she threw out her hand in a frantic little gesture and darted across the room. She ran down the steps, stood bewildered and half blinded in a pit of darkness. He pulled her arm.

"Look here, Miss Bryce; we can't do this—"

She ran down the hill, not heeding, dashing her feet against the scattering pebbles. Suddenly he took hold of her arm, whispered roughly, "All right, then!"

She felt herself hurled, pushed, leaping.

Far below the lights of the boat streamed into the slip.

"You've got to run—quicker!"

He swept an arm about her.

They dashed through the gate, breathless, the blood pounding in their ears.

"Outside?"

She nodded, sinking to the bench, closing her eyes, waiting for her pulse to quiet.

Suddenly her mind flashed a picture of Janina; then of Jake as they discovered her gone.

Safe now, on the boat; on the way home, relieved of her deadly fear, the baldness of her flight stood forth in a chill, dismaying light.

Dashed off, not waiting to bid them farewell—as though they were monsters—what would they think? She had outraged their hospitality like an insane person. Her thought cowered.

Barry Dunne, sitting next her, his hat off, smoked meditatively as though he were alone. His profile was sharply toward her—non-committal. He took long puffs at his cigarette, exhaling slowly, blowing the smoke upward.

She waited for him to speak and grew miserable when he remained fixed in silence. Finally she said, "I'm sorry to spoil your fun."

"What was the big idea?"

"I had to get home! I can't stay out all night without a moment's notice. If I phoned at twelve o'clock and said I wasn't coming home my father would think I'd lost my mind."

"Didn't you know we were to stay when we started across the bay?"

"No."

"Every one else did."

She let her hands drop in her lap, folded. A wave of pity swept her. She was ridiculous. It wasn't fair in Jonathan to ask so much. Other girls could have phoned. They wouldn't be forced to miss a glorious cruise over the bay. But she must give up the glad pleasure. She must do an absurd, unheard-of thing. They would never ask her anywhere again. No one would.

Night after night she would sit at home with Jonathan reading his paper; Jennie rocking or sewing in her little squat chair.

And this happy, young fellow from across the alley who had given her such delightful shivers of excitement with his gay flirting. Of course that was finished, too.

She was unaware of the white delicacy of her face turned toward him and the sheer beauty of her long, slender lines. But Barry Dunne, intently alert, felt her soft, wistful grace stir poignantly through every fiber.

For weeks her face with its corn-gold hair had made pictures at the window for him. She was a vision for poetry, drawing him like some mysterious perfume.

Now, sitting next to her, seeing the black lashes of her lowered eyes, he had a sudden desire to draw her in his arms—say some kind, gracious thing.

He put his hand on hers, pressed them softly. "Listen—don't be so unhappy. Why for?"

"I don't know what you can be thinking of me. I shouldn't have ruined your day, too."

"Oh, shucks! Who cares? Don't you know I went along just to meet you?"

"You aren't angry with me?"

He laughed. "Just now I'm nearer to lov—"

"No—don't say that. I hate to hear people make fun of love the way Janina and Nicky and Jake do. They say, 'I love you,' and it doesn't mean any more than if they say, 'I see you.'"

"Ah—but when I say it to a girl like you . . ."

"As you've said it hundreds of times already?"

He gave her a quick, merry look. "So no one sweeps you off your feet with that old wind? Here, lean back, take it easy." He drew her hands, but when he stooped and would have kissed her, she shook her head.

It quickened the eagerness in him. He turned her hands upward and kissed them. "Suppose I phone to-morrow, Miss Bryce. Maybe we can patch up this ruined day."

She met his eyes with a rush of spontaneous gratitude.

"I'd love that!"

The night that had been so clouded with fears was now on a sudden all a-star with happiness.

CHAPTER XV

JONATHAN LAYS DOWN LAW

JENNIE BRYCE, blue and shivering, stood with the window shade clenched in her hands. Her heart beat wildly.

A girl and a man were coming across the street, the girl walking delicately—graceful as a flower.

Tears sprang into Jennie's eyes. She said half aloud: "Ah, God be thanked!" and again, "Thanks be to God!"

Coming up the steps, a tall, fine young man holding Chickie's hand. Hushed voices—the young man's arm around Chickie's waist.

Jennie's breath stopped. The man was drawing Chickie to him, holding her. Ah—but now Chickie was shaking her head—pulling gently free.

Jennie saw that—all of it. She raised her head proudly. That Jonathan with his fears! But her daughter—her Chickie, she knew what to do. Jennie stole down the hall, quivering with exultance.

A moment later Chickie crept in noiselessly, avoiding with infinite pains the creaky boards. She heard Jonathan snore. It heartened her like a trumpet note. She closed her door softly, laughing with joy at this triumphant entrance. Asleep—the two of them—luck again.

Her door opening, Jennie with the candle; Jennie catching her in her arms, kissing the fresh, young face, wetting it with her tears. "What kept you? What kept you? It's after two. I've been waiting and waiting."

"Oh, mother! Hush! You'll wake Jonathan. It's not so late . . ." And to stop Jennie's eager tongue Chickie rushed headlong into an ecstatic account of the evening. Whenever Jennie interrupted with, "But—" "But I don't see what kept you so long—" Chickie burst into new raptures. "It was thrilling. It was wonderful. We ate and we danced and we ate again. And all that takes time. Oh, but I'm so tired, Jennie darling. I'll tell you the rest in the morning."

She wasn't tired. Her nerves throbbed. Her brain was a

rainbow flashing colors; her heart sank. The pins but half out of her hair, the golden mass tumbling, she paused, remembering. His arm about her like that; his clean cut, ardent young face—ah—now she half wished she had let it happen. But, no—no—she wouldn't—not for a long time—if he should love her—truly—well, then—

Yet it was sweet to think about—sweet to close her eyes and let her dreams soar. He had been thinking of her as she had thought of him. He called her the Blessed Damozel. Why? Who was she?

Just as she was falling asleep the thought of Janina and Jake came with a chill. She turned over quickly—all that could wait.

Chickie's room was on the side of the little cottage. Through its ell-window the morning sun trembled in soft yellow patches over the carpet—it went shivering delicately across the mirror, taking a rosy glow from the cretonne drapes.

Jennie Bryce went padding from shadow to light, raising a shade, putting a tray covered with a white napkin on a table; glancing furtively at the long, slender form, impatient for Chickie to awaken.

Chickie watched, pretending to be asleep. Jennie hadn't lost any time. Jennie would now begin her shy, eager cross-examination, sending down her questions like plummets to sound the still, mysterious depths of Chickie's heart.

Because her heart was clear and happy then Chickie laughed. Jennie came hurrying over to the bed, set out the tray, fussing with the sugar and cream. She was agitated. All those things Jonathan had said about the smoking and that stuck like red thorns in her flesh.

Seeing this, Chickie said flippantly: "Nice breakfast. What's biting you, sweet Jennie?"

"Chickie, that's no way for you to talk to your mother."

Laughing: "But you love it, don't you, old dear?"

Mrs. Bryce pursed her lips. She got up and poured out Chickie's coffee; sat down again.

"Was it Mr. Munson brought you home?"

"No. He was the host, of course. It was Mr. Dunne."

"I didn't hear a machine stopping at the door."

"Oh—well—you see, Mr. Dunne didn't bring his car and we had to wait on the 'owl.' That's another thing delayed us."

Jennie wet her lips, drew them in and, trying to speak care-

lessly, brought out her trembling question in a solemn whisper: "Chickie, do you ever kiss any of these young men?"

She didn't expect that from quiet little Jennie. She parried a moment, then threw her mother a shocked look: "Mother! Why, the idea! Such a thing to say!"

Jennie blushed: "Of course—well, I didn't think you did."

"I can't imagine why you ask. Did you kiss young men? Did you ever kiss any one but father?"

It was Jennie's turn to be alarmed. "Chickie! Why, I'm surprised!"

"Oh, my, yes! But you think it's all right to ask me!"

"I just wanted to make sure," said Jennie, accepting Chickie's evasion. "Because when I was a girl things were different. We didn't earn our own money. Why, my mother would have died before she would have given her daughter a latchkey. I never kissed your father till we were engaged . . . and only when he came and when he left."

Confident that the inquiry was over, Chickie began to tease: "Well, don't you think you're grand, Jennie! It seems to me you were mighty adventurous. For my part, I'll sip a little before I contract to swallow the whole dish!"

"Chickie, I wish you wouldn't talk like that. People may think you mean it."

Chickie laughed and sprang from bed. As she dressed she leaned musing on the comb. Was her mother honest? Did she really think a kiss so shocking? Did she suppose Chickie never kissed any one? And was all that true about the girls of yesterday?

Well—they had their day!

Pale, monotonous day.

Better to be walking young in the bright sun now.

Chickie took a sprig of mignonette from the vase her mother had filled, smelt it dreamily. She was dressed now—feeling herself light, fragrant, silly with content. She would step into this sun that flowed down the street like a great golden bath—she would take a little run down to the Blakes. She had a question for Martha.

She wanted to say, carelessly, "Martha Blake, who is the Blessed Damozel?"

Jonathan was in the living-room. She heard him rustling the papers. She planned to dash in breathlessly, give him half

a dozen kisses and, before he had his breath again, she would be gone.

But Jonathan, one eye on the hall, had other plans. As Chickie came running in he stood up—rugged, gigantic—enough to strike terror in any heart but hers.

"Oh—you old pieface! Sitting in here alone! Here, bend down—a kiss, please."

He kissed her and held her. "It was after two when you got in, Chickie. What does this mean?"

"Pooh! Who wants to know?"

"Your father wants to know!" Every word a bolt.

She laughed, but nervously: "Well, if that's the way you're going to roar—"

"I'm not fooling, Chickie. There's no rime or reason in a girl of your age coming home at two o'clock in the morning."

"Oh—ho-ho—it wasn't four! That's the time you used to arrive! You've sat here hundreds of times and boasted about the parties that didn't end until the next day—"

She tried to shove him on the defensive, cramming his own words down his throat.

He grew pale: "Chickie, are you going to treat me like this?"

"Oh, Jonathan, begin the sob stuff now! What—what did I do? I was only fooling with you. Stand up there so stiff. You want to make me cry, I suppose—"

And she went stammering into a quick account of the long dinner, the dancing—the fun and all the people. She said, ending: "If you were there you'd not get home at all. You ought to go some night and take Jennie. Why don't you? It's wonderful! Now—do you think you ought to stand there glowering like this—horrible old Jonathan—"

She dropped her head quickly. He came and put his arms about her shoulders. "I don't want to pry too much, Chickie. You're the only thing I have. I've worried a lot. I shouldn't let you go out with these strange young men without even seeing them."

"What do you mean? Don't you think I can look out for myself?"

"I mean that from now on you'll bring these men into this house first. There'll be no more tooting of a horn for you."

"Oh—nobody does that to-day. Why—you want to make a laughing-stock of me . . ."

"Don't worry about that, Chickie. A man will respect you the more—"

"Any old time! Listen, Jonathan—you won't do that?"

"Are you ashamed of your father?"

"Oh, all right, all right—but if you go handing out any woof-woof talk— I'm going out to-night with Barry Dunne. If you spoil that, Jonathan—you'll just break my heart. . . ."

"If what I do can spoil it, Chickie—then your heart will have to break—you don't go out with him till I see him."

CHAPTER XVI

OLD AND YOUNG

Not quite so jubilant!—not quite so thrilled with her own youth and prettiness, Chickie walked down the block. She gulped once or twice. She didn't have to take orders from Jonathan. He didn't own her. She'd tell him that!

Oh, yes! And have him give her a hurt, tragic look, as though she were stepping on his throat—

They took advantage of her love—Jonathan and her mother did. She knew it. She could no more stand up and say to them: "I earn my own way. I'll do as I please," than she could strike them. She would suffer any subterfuge, any evasion, rather than deal them a blow like this.

Just the same, she was determined rigidly on one thing—she would not turn her back on all the new pleasures that were now opening to her. Oh, she had wanted them far too long!

Sunday after Sunday when she had loafed around the house, or visited Mary or gone to a movie with Jimmy, how she had longed to be racing down the country in an automobile, speeding off on a joyous picnic to some beautiful woodside. Often when she saw the machines—thousands of them returning in the evening down Mission Street, fruit blossoms, red pepper berries, poppies waving from the sides—she had stood still with eagerness. She had thought with glistening expectance: "Some day! My turn! Soon!"

Now it was come . . . the bright new life. She ran to meet it, ardently waiting for it to sweep upon her like a tide, strong and beautiful, alive with its own music. Oh—she was young. She had a right to this.

Half way up the garden walk she plucked a pink rose, ran her trembling fingers over the soft leaves. What was Jonathan going to say? Would he insult her? Would he lay down some ridiculous laws?

She wondered what Martha Blake would say to this. Chickie had a picture in her mind of the Blake mother. It was of a tall, ample-busted woman—an elemental figure, carrying a baby,

on her hip—always a baby. Cooking the dinner, standing at the door to buy vegetables from a peddler, the “immortal infant,” as Mary called it, was always in evidence.

They were Martha’s grandchildren. They overran her house from the time her own youngest, Tommy, was in arms. Martha was a perennial mother, a great, faithful tree, taking no laurels to herself, but doing her part with wise, serene tolerance.

With her deep mind and her mellow heart she might have flashed her name brilliantly before the world. But she had loved and married. Seven children had come to her. They were her compensations.

Sometimes, indeed, seeing them dissatisfied, her mind nagged her with disturbing questions.

After all, had she the right to bring all these children here? Suppose they should be unhappy? Suppose they should scorn the gift of life thrust upon them so audaciously? They often reminded her that they had not asked to come; they told her very coolly that her wish for children was a purely selfish instinct. It did not merit gratitude from them.

Martha agreed. She found no answers for her problems. She met them with a brave, adventurous trust in the future.

Chickie loved Martha Blake. She was such an easy, pleasant person—one that you could accost carelessly like this: “Well, what about it now—did you honestly never kiss a man in your life except your husband?”

Martha had never built up about herself the “mother legend.” She had never required that her children think her perfect, so there was not this unnatural chasm between her omnipotence and their humanity. She cheerfully admitted herself in the wrong, begged their pardon, accepted their censure. In return they loved her without bounds, sought her opinions, quoted her as a prophet.

She was in the kitchen making huge platters of sandwiches. These would be set on the dining-room table for the Sunday influx of family and friends.

Mary was sitting on a low stool, somewhat ungracefully sprawled. Young Edward, whom she had just nursed, lay on her knees, bringing shy, gentle sounds from his throat. Hearing the faint cooing and evidently surprised to find himself a maker of noise, his eyes and his lips became fairly rapturous with smiles.

Mary listened, as though some beatific sympathy opened to her

ears. "Do you think he's getting pretty, Chickie? Listen—that's a new one."

Chickie knelt on the linoleum, the little satiny fingers twined on her thumb. When the baby, after a prolonged gurgle, gave her a startled, inquiring look, as though it said, "Ha, ha! Did you get that? I did it!" she burst out laughing.

"He's going to look like Jimmy, Mary."

"Do you think so? I think he's like Edward. I want him to be like Edward."

"Why?"

"It's nice for a son to follow in his father's steps."

Chickie seized this eagerly. She asked her first question. "Do you think that, Mrs. Blake? Do you believe a father and mother should decide a child's whole life? Just because they happen to bring us here have they the right to tell us how we should think and feel and act?"

"If I'm any example, Chickie, it's the children that tell the parents where to head in."

"Yes! Maybe! But you take Jonathan—he thinks I ought to be the very same kind of a girl mother was. Stay at home night after night—be perfectly content to work and eat and sleep and never see any of the exciting things at all. He wouldn't ask me to wear a hoopskirt or a bustle, but he expects me to take all those old ideas and just transport myself to the last century. Is that fair?"

"Poor Jonathan! Don't you see, Chickie, that it's only because he knows the old road was safe and led to a sure goal. How can the poor man know where the paths a girl takes to-day are going to twist? They run blind through a wilderness. Whether there's a land of milk and honey beyond no one yet may say."

"Oh—you think we're as bad as all that?"

"Not bad—but terribly uncertain. Don't be too hard on Jonathan."

"But just the same I think he ought to be satisfied with one life. Why should he expect to live two—his own and mine? And, anyway, I don't think so much of those old days."

"No? Why?"

"Well—well, do you know that Jennie never kissed a man but Jonathan—and not till she was engaged, and then only once in a while? Do you think there's any harm in a kiss?"

Martha laughed. "That depends so much on who gives it

and who takes it, and whether it's returned and taken again. You see, a kiss has such a way of weaving itself into an endless chain."

"I don't mean that kind. I mean just one single kiss."

"That's an extinct variety, Chickie. It went out of existence with the lavender and old lace of your mother's day. The trouble with a kiss is this: It isn't a finality, but a prelude. A faint, sweet note that may at any moment and unaware melt into the crash of terrific and sweeping music. If you want to hear that, all right. But if you don't, why listen at all?"

"I suppose, then, you'd say a girl ought never at all to kiss any one?"

"I'd say that, but I know no girl would heed it." Martha looked into Chickie's flushed, eager face. Her own saddened a little. "So I'd say, instead, there's no harm at all in one kiss, unless it leads to two. There's not much harm in two unless they lead to three. At three—stop!"

Chickie laughed and, going over, put her arm around Martha's ample waist. "Now that's settled I want to know something else. Did you ever hear of the 'Blessed Damsel'?"

Martha, sweeping the gold hair from Chickie's neck, smiled. "Is that what he called you, Chickie?"

She quoted softly:

"The blessed damozel leaned out
From the gold bar of heaven.
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of water stilled at even.
She had three lilies in her hand
And the stars in her hair were seven."

"Don't you know that, Chickie? You must have studied it at school. Now wait. I used to know it all."

"Oh!" Chickie cried rapturously. "Can't you remember the rest?" To herself came the swift thought: Poetry! He must be a highbrow.

Young Tommy just then dashed through the kitchen, grabbing a handful of sandwiches on the fly. He was ordered to halt.

"Would you mind, Tommy, dear—that old green book from my table."

"Gee whiz, ma! Feller can't come near this house without having to do something. Gee whiz—crimine!"

Before Martha could reach him he went flying up the stairs, came back, grinning, giving her the book.

Her rich voice brought forth glowing the pictures and the passions of the beautiful lines. Chickie listened with a ripple in her heart.

She took the tattered old green volume. "Lend it to me? Rossetti—is he a very great poet?"

"Perhaps not very great, for he didn't seem to know that beauty is only beautiful when its heart is truth. But he's often very exquisite. Read the ones that are marked."

Mary went down the garden walk with Chickie, whispering excitedly: "I knew it, Chickie! You fell for him? He's wild about you?"

"Who?"

"Oh, who, your eye! Jake Munson, of course!"

Chickie smiled sweetly: "No, Mary, old love, not Jake Munson." When Mary heard the new name and heard a little else she shook her head wisely: "What did I tell you—settled down like me in less than a year! I see it plain as day."

"Like the deuce you do! I'll have a few years of freedom first."

Chickie meant it. She felt as though a wondrous gate were swinging wide inviting her into some joyous garden. She meant to enter: to loiter blithely along the happy paths.

As soon as she was on the sidewalk she stopped short—a sudden clutch at her heart. A little roadster was at her door.

He had come—already—without phoning. He was in the living room now. Jonathan was talking to him.

She was half afraid to go into the house.

CHAPTER XVII

TO KISS OR NOT

CHICKIE opened the door softly, half expecting some loud, precipitate talk to rush against her ears. Instead, Jonathan—quite a jovial, hospitable Jonathan—was coming down the hall. He said, pleasantly, "I was just going for you. Mr. Dunne is here." Kindly, like that, as though Mr. Dunne were his life-long friend.

Chickie, standing on her toes, pinches his mustache, whispering smartly, "Well, Smarty!"

Yet she was so overjoyed and relieved to find no crude scene clashing in the living room that she became very magnificent and airy, saying, "Why, how do you do? I expected a phone."

Then, seeing Barry Dunne, very snappy in gray tweeds and a glad, holiday look about him, she ended gayly, "It won't take me a minute to get ready—gorgeous day, isn't it?"

"I thought we'd take a run down the country. We can have dinner later on when we get back. How's that with you?"

"That will be very charming with me." She winked daringly into Barry Dunne's eyes. "But how about you, Jonathan, old dear?"

She was immediately frightened at her flippant boldness and ran out of the room before Jonathan could answer. When she returned in a little while, very shiny eyed and flushed, in a soft green hat and a black dress, he only said, casually, "Don't stay too late. Now, mind you, it was all hours when you got to bed last night."

To her astonishment, Barry answered, "We'll be home around ten or so. We've both got to work to-morrow." Quite a master stroke, Chickie thought.

As she took her place he gave her a quick, winning smile, helping her most gallantly. She wondered if the neighbors might be watching behind the curtain; if they were saying: "Now, who is that? If that girl hasn't enough admirers!"

He had an "air" about him, Chickie thought—no more attentive than Jimmy—yet different—a little distinguished. You'd

know, she was certain, that he was an attorney full of ambition and that he had a high destiny before him.

They spread out through the park, so different in its flood of sun; its throngs of men and women going to the music stand; its bright green trees from the mysterious forest they had driven across the night before.

She felt him every now and then glancing at her. It heightened the vivid sense of suspense; of something wonderful happening that kept the bright color tingling in her cheeks. She was glad now that she'd missed the cruise on the bay. She wondered if he was.

Suddenly, with a slow, quizzical inquiry: "That dad of yours is pretty sore about last night?"

"Oh—what makes you think that?" After all, had Jonathan said some bald, stinging things? "He didn't call you about it, did he?"

"No—just put two and two together—my business, you know. He keeps tab on you all the time?"

"Indeed, yes! I'm his little pearl, you know. And I think he'd be pleased to have me live and die in my shell without any one ever once giving me the glad eye."

She spoke with hurried earnestness, for his red hair with his pleasant eyes, his beautifully set head, had such a clear, kind look of understanding.

"Well," he said cheerfully, "we can't let him get away with that! Doesn't he like Jake?"

"He doesn't know him."

"I thought you and Jake were old friends."

"Why, no—Jake is Janina's friend."

Barry Dunne shot one of the quick, dubious glances he had several times given her. He said nothing. After a while he shrugged: "Well, neither you nor I will be much of a friend to Jake henceforth."

"Will he be very furious?"

"He will. He's murdered men for less. I should worry! But, of course, he'll think I abducted you on purpose."

"I suppose it was a terrible thing for me to do, but I don't care now. Some one should have told me they were going to stay all night. I wouldn't have gone."

"When you're on a party like that you've got to be ready to take a chance."

Chickie winced. "You think I should have stayed, then?"

"Of course we should have stayed! But thank heaven we didn't! This is a lot better than baking on a yacht and seeing you with Jake and I with the subtle Janina in my arms! Or perhaps you'd rather be there?"

"I would not!"

"All right, then, I'll take you to my favorite tree and I'll sing you an old song."

As they followed the long line of machines at the beach, Chickie kept her eyes wide; delighted now and then when she saw a girl she knew and bowed to her—quite hilarious, this flying down the line—jaunty as any one and with a fine, laughing fellow like Barry Dunne.

They turned off the main road, wound in and out, up and down—fog, dropping veils that shimmered, as it sped wistfully over the hilltops, poplar trees shivering and whispering; then a flash and below them the ocean all in piercing blue, came rushing with shouts against the rocks.

They curved through the hills and stopped, running the car into a little bypath.

Sheer above them rose a bluff, its top crowned with slender eucalyptus. He took her hands, half pulling her up the hill. They ran upward laughing.

Through the leaves they could see the waters gleaming. The golden hush throbbed about them with a soft, gentle air, intensifying the silence—the still, remote aloneness.

"Now," he said, spreading his overcoat on the dry grasses, "sit ye down and let us enjoy this moment. Heaven knows we've looked forward to it long enough. Oh, all right, then! You haven't. I've looked forward to it alone. When the breeze blew your eyes across the alley, I've thought, 'If I were only rich, I and the charming one yonder would this hour be parked out under a tree.' And here we are!"

"Yes! And it's lovely, isn't it?"

"Better than that. I could see, of course, that you were a sweet, beautiful thing. I had no idea you were deep into the bargain." He pulled Martha's old tattered volume from his pocket with a laugh. "You dropped this on the chair."

Guilty color raced into her cheeks. But he went on: "You like him. Well, come over and make yourself comfortable. I'll read you one. You won't? Don't then!" He went scanning through the book: "Oh, you have this marked—pippin, isn't it?"

He read with a deep, clear intonation the "Lost Days."

When he finished he tossed the book from him, caught her hands and pressed them: "Golywogs! That puts a crimp in one, doesn't it?"

"You haven't many lost days, have you?"

"When they're lost, girl, they're lost! I never go snooping around waiting for ghosts to peer from corners I've already turned."

Chickie had all of the very young girl's eager curiosity about the inner life of a young man—especially of a gallant, pleasant fellow like Barry Dunne. She wondered grippingly if he had really "done things." She hoped achingly that he had not. She said: "I don't believe you have many ghosts after you."

"Thanks for that kind of thought! Would you mind twisting your elbow a little. That's better." He rested his head against her arm. "And I believe you haven't any at all. But then you're a most surprising girl." He was looking up at her and laughing: "Most surprising. She won't flirt—won't even drop a fellow a smile, and then when he rescues her in the dead of night she leaves him with a cold nod. Here—read."

She took the book happily—feeling herself clothed with a mysterious charm. She read on and on, her voice singing through the stillness.

He was quiet—his eyes closed. She looked down—with a pang of dismay saw that he was sleeping. She sat perfectly still, looking at the fine, ruddy profile—the long brown lashes—his mouth so young—full cut and sweet. A lock of the red hair blew across his forehead. Thoughtlessly she brushed it back—letting her hand loiter gently.

She smiled—her fingers ever so lightly smoothing his eyebrows. Suddenly and giving her a frightened start, his eyes opened into hers. His hands reached up, drew her down. But she would not. She shook her head—gave him a little push—sprang to her feet.

He stretched and yawned and laughed. . . . "I suppose we'll have to go." He put his arm about her waist—and whispered, bending over her, "Why so hard and stern. . . . Just one—please . . ."

She felt him leaning down—she would have liked to raise her face and find the kiss falling! Her lips were ready—her mind held back. She said, "No—no—please don't—!"

She let the moment go—but with regret. Until she saw his

eyes quick. A triumph swept her. He liked what he had not got.

She would remember that. She thought about it smiling as they sat at the gay little dinner. He made her talk—made her tell about herself. She told a little and made up a lot. He listened with his gray eyes twinkling.

Afterward they took a ride along the Marina. A warm, balmy night—a dozen automobiles parked with their lights out—couples sitting in the back. Chickie saw the forms, close together. . . . She felt nervous, a little shamed . . .

Across the bay the dim outlines of Sausalito and Tamalpais, a crown of silver on its head.

He slumped down, his arm behind her, and smoked. "Did you enjoy the day, Chickie?"

"Beautiful—all of it—"

"Take off your hat, please." He touched her hair. "There, and to-morrow when you look out the window, will you smile?"

"Yes—but you aren't a lonely fellow at all—I can see that now—"

"Yes, I am—very. . . . I'm not strong for parties like last night, but they're the only kind people give these days. I enjoy a time like we've had a lot better. You're the only girl—"

She waited breathless, feeling his eyes intent on her face—

"You're the only girl like you I've met out here—"

"In the whole three years?"

"Yes, and I'd be likely to wait three more and three more after that. I knew it from that first day I saw you. . . ."

"At the window?"

"Yes—and your hair in the sun—let me see—"

He turned her sharply, looking into her eyes, a lighter eagerness in his face. "Yes, at the window—anywhere—you're beautiful!"

And suddenly—like that—holding her, his lips laughed and closed on hers.

CHAPTER XVIII

JANINA'S WARNING

SHE closed her eyes—a moment unresistant—heard a high, free note strike out exultant in her heart. She said softly, “You shouldn’t. It wasn’t fair.”

“Ah—but so sweet.”

She clasped her hands, silent, looking down, startled to find herself wondering and half wishing that he might do it again.

He took her hands, pressing them. “Look here, Chickie, you’re not angry with me.”

“But I told you not to—”

“One little kiss? Would you be that stingy?”

“I don’t think kisses are such little things. Anyway, I’m saving mine.”

“Every first, last, single one of them?”

“Yes.”

“For whom?”

“For somebody great and noble.”

He laughed. “Well, I guess that’s I, since I got it. But if you wanted this one in particular, I’ll give it back for another.”

She would have liked to let herself lean back, feel his face against hers as she had in that short, blissful moment.

But she didn’t—nor when they stood at the door. She got into her own room quickly, sat on the bed. The room was dark; she felt herself glowing like a flame. She touched her face where his cheek, firm and warm, had pressed a second on hers.

She began to undress swiftly. Suddenly, as she absently hung up her dress, Mary’s fling of the morning darted into her mind: “I see it, Chickie—you’ll be married and settled down like I am in a year.”

She turned on the light briskly, saying half aloud: “Oh, yes, any old time! Very likely I’ll walk into that! Pooh—a kiss—what’s that?”

But her thoughts dwelt on it. Meant nothing—he kissed every girl he went out with—silly to make a fuss over it—to

nk about it now. As Janina said, "A kiss is but a small coin
sed to the men who entertain us like a tip to a waiter."
She told herself this coldly. And, remembering, found a
rm, melting flush playing over her like a wave; found her-
f smiling, trembling to meet that window the next morning.
She trembled, too, with more than one pang, to meet Janina.
t she had decided to win this battle with silent dignity. She
s the injured one. She had been placed in a hideous posi-
n. She would walk in, quietly, waiting for Janina to open
e attack.

Janina did—but not in the manner Chickie expected.
'Good morning,' she said pleasantly, when Chickie entered.
fail to the virgin and martyr."

Chickie gave her a flaring look of anger. Janina shrugged.
ou didn't need to worry, Chickie. Make an idiot of yourself.
raid some one was going to ru-in you? Don't have to kidnap
ls in this day and age!"

They were sharp arrows quivering in her flesh, but she said
tily: "All your sarcasm, Janina, doesn't cover up the con-
ptible trick you did!"

'I did!' with a shrill curve to the prolonged "I." "Well, of
the nerve! I suppose you were drugged and carried off
dily. I suppose I held the sponge over your nose!"

'You could have told me we were to stay all night.'

'I don't know where you thought we were going. Straight
wn Market Street! Anyway, Chickie, you did me a worse
ck than I would dream of doing you. You got me in wrong
h the whole crowd. You spoiled the whole affair. And it
s a rotten way to treat Jake. You could at least have shouted
ood-by.'"

She kept this up, going back over it until Chickie felt herself
shed against the wall. She said finally, "Well, I'm sorry. I
d to go home. That's all there was to it."

'Oh, you'll be likely to stay home! Don't worry about that.
d pulling Barry off with you! Queered yourself there, too.'
'Well, never you mind about that, Janina!"

She went to her desk, too shaken even to glance from the
ndow. Twice during the morning she was aware that he was
ring over. She didn't look.

But early in the afternoon, when the sun came streaming
e a yellow banner across her typewriter, she stood up, reach-
g for some papers. She looked down, knowing that he was

there. He threw back his head, staring at her and smiling. He drew his lips, full cut and sweet, together. Then he laughed.

He went back to his desk, a buoyant spring in his thoughts. He took a pencil and made a note on the margin of some legal papers. Then he fell to wondering. The dear, beautiful thing—and clever, too. He never expected that.

He could feel her soft hands; he could see her pretty eyes, startled when he had suddenly awakened and her lips clinging so gently to his.

More piercingly than this, he saw her sitting motionless and unresistant, her hands clasped in her lap. Something appealing and wistful and ever so girlish in the beauty of her face caught him with a strange, persistent thrill.

She said she didn't kiss men. Could that be true? A girl with that hair and eyes and dear little mouth like that. No—he couldn't quite believe that. But that old dad of hers—domineering old fellow—kept tab on her.

His heart raced a bit—thinking all this. True or not—she was a wonder—a prize—different from others—he would meet her as she came from work.

Barry Dunne was a young man—not yet twenty-four—full of ambition. Underneath his happy-go-lucky manner was a strong, poetic streak that made him sensitive and self-conscious.

He liked girls, but as a boy had suffered miseries because of his red hair and terrible freckles. It was a surprise to him, coming into manhood, to find himself attractive to women. He couldn't at first believe it—in fact, was never quite certain. He rather enjoyed experimenting—trying out his various charms.

So he had "lost days," as he darkly boasted to Chickie. For all that, he was a pleasant, kind young man who had "played about" gallantly and doing as little harm as possible. He had no unholy or very cruel ghosts in his closet.

He took the phone—called her—asked her to wait just outside the building for him. She tried to keep her voice low, but it fluttered off gayly.

Janina sat opposite, idle. Chickie wondered if she had heard. A little before five she stacked her papers, put them neatly and swiftly in the wire baskets.

"What's your hurry?" Janina drawled.

Chickie took her hat, left quickly without answering.

"Let's hurry," she said to him without greeting. "I don't want Janina to see us."

"Surreptitious like! Say, this has been the darnedest, longest day!" They cut down through the alley. "You never looked over once this morning."

"I couldn't."

"Why? Did Janina make it hot for you?"

"No—I should care about Janina!"

"Good for you! Listen—I have to work to-night and to-morrow, but how about Wednesday night?"

"I don't know. What about it?"

"Oh, a show, or if it stays nice we might have a long ride. Will you? Don't give me a dark look, girl. I'll be good!"

"All right, then."

He held her hand a moment, and looking square at her, pursed his lips. She blushed.

Tuesday at noon Janina came up and put her arm about Chickie with her old affection: "Don't be sore any longer, Chickie. I'll forget it, if you will. Let me come to lunch with you?"

When they were sitting at the table Janina leaned over and said sweetly: "So Red liked being spirited off? Don't get upstage, Chickie. I saw you lovey-doveing down the alley. I guess it's just as well. He's more your sort than Jake . . ."

"You jump at things, Janina."

"It's all right as long as it's only me. But if Jake thought that you and Red put up the deal on him—well—I'd watch out if I were you."

The day turned cloudy, a brisk rain falling. Toward evening it turned into a gray, soaking downpour. Chickie had no umbrella. She hurried down California Street. Half a block from Montgomery, a machine, a dark red sedan, swerved sharply, drew up at the curb, stopped.

Jake Munson got out. Directly in front of her he stopped, swept off his hat: "Get in, Chickie—I'm taking you home."

CHAPTER XIX

JAKE'S CHALLENGE

HE stood with his hat off, the rain dashing in his face.

"I can't, Mr. Munson; I can't."

"Quicker than the street cars, Chickie. You're getting soaked—so am I."

She cast a hurried glance down the block, saw Janina and Connie Smith coming toward them. Jake saw that, too; saw the pang of misery in her eyes—

"Quick—get in!"

She let him rush her to the machine. They dashed around the corner—out Post Street. He stopped the engine, gave her a quick, triumphant glance, took out his handkerchief and wiped the thick, glossy hair.

"Well," he said, "melodramatic, aren't we? Didn't mean to haul it off high-handed like that, but I was a bit afraid to phone."

He ended abruptly: "You're coming to dinner with me, Chickie."

She sat quiet in the midst of a clashing inner excitement. Jake's black eyes and his red, smiling mouth turned to her expectantly.

"You will, Chickie?"

"No."

"Yes—listen—you owe this much to me. There are a good many things I have to say to you. You owe me at least a chance to square myself. Do you think you treated me exactly right?"

"Maybe not."

"Well—you didn't." A faint smile touched his lips. The poise of this little, slim thing sitting there entirely quiet, and he—Jake, who could have had any of a dozen girls—pleading with her—"You didn't—and I want to tell you why. I have a lot to say and since you and I are going to be friends. . . . Oh, yes, we are! You might as well hear it now."

"I'm expected home for dinner."

"Well, phone and tell them we're dining downtown. . . . I'll

bring you home early . . . any time you say . . . please, Chickie."

His face took on a vivid earnestness, and when he saw her eyes brightening and a flush spreading swiftly over her soft cheeks, he reached down and pressed her hands . . .

"That's not much to ask. Why, any other girl would have written a note . . . she would at least have explained . . . don't you think so, Chickie?"

"I have thought of that . . . I really felt very sorry over it all . . ."

"Then you tell me about it . . . We'll have a quiet bite. It's a go? You dear!"

She put on her gloves slowly, her hands moist, her heart rushing. From the corner of her eye she stole a glimpse at his bent head; the rich vital color of his face. Her inward excitement mounted.

"Solari's, how's that? Something tasty . . .?"

"Anywhere."

He gave her a kind, chuckling look: "See here, Chickie, don't be so indifferent. Any one would think you were swept off your feet every day in the year."

But she was merely uncertain, agitated, not sure what excuse to make when she phoned. She saw Jennie taking the knife and fork from the table; making hasty, tremulous excuses to Jonathan; then the two of them sitting down, silent—oppressed. Well—she would say she had to work—easiest way—they couldn't object to that.

But when she went to the phone she couldn't bring the lie out. She said in a fluttered, strained tone, "Hello, Jennie, dear. Well—Jennie, Mr. Munson wants me to have dinner with him. Is that all right with you?"

"Why, Chickie, no! Your father expects you."

"I'll be home early—by nine, surely. You see, I have to stay down. It's on business. Now, you tell him that, please, mother darling."

Jake waited for her, saying chummily: "Did you get away with that all right? Good—the world is ours!"

She couldn't restrain a throb of pride walking down the room with this handsome, exultant fellow. He made the men at the tables seem bald, shiny-faced, futile. He held out her chair as though she were a princess.

"Now we'll begin to even this score right and you know

there's only one way to do it right." He gave an order to the waiter, who presently brought in two glasses of orange sherbet. Jake took a small bottle from his pocket and very quietly poured in a white liquid that might have been water. He took a spoon and mixed it vigorously until a milky foam spread over the top.

"Quaff, my dear, and tell me how you like Jake's only original creation."

She took it hesitantly, her eyes lowered, conscious that he was fixedly watching her, that his mouth was becoming tense.

"Chickie, see here! Do you think I'm giving you a drink that might hurt you? There's nothing in that but a spoonful of the finest old gin. A baby could drink it. You had a couple much stronger last Saturday. They didn't seem to cloud your reason any."

"Why—I was only looking at the colors—pretty, aren't they?"

She raised it laughing, tasted something icy and fragrant that went tingling into her veins with a warm radiance, brought a glow of subtle, relaxed peace into her heart.

"Now," said Jake, leaning toward her, "I have three questions. Will you answer them honestly, Chickie?"

"I'm not sure about that, Mr. Munson. They say it's much better for a girl to be wise than frank."

"Who says that—the black one?"

She laughed merrily. "The Bible! We should be wise as serpents and soft as doves."

"You're all there on the last of it—dear. Yes, you dear! But, try out your wisdom, if you want. First—did you think I took you across the bay meaning to keep you there against your will?"

"Oh, no! You couldn't do that!"

"So I see. But did you think I wished to?"

"Not exactly, but I thought it cruel that no one happened to let me know where we were going."

He winced: "Perhaps it was. I didn't really think about it at all. I was feeling high and mighty, as you know. But I'll never let a thing like that happen to you again. The next time—"

"There isn't going to be any next time!"

"Yes, there are—a great many of them—"

There suddenly darted before her with impish mirth a picture of Jake Munson sitting in their small wicker living room, undergoing the grand quiz by the imperturbable Jonathan. It

struck her as so funny she laughed outright. Looking at him, her eyes shining and wide like a little girl's, she said sweetly:

"I fear not, sir! Henceforth no one takes this Lily of Fair-oaks a-walking without special permission from the grand czar, Jonathan!"

He grew suddenly pale. "Chickie, did you tell your father I took you across the bay and tried to keep you from getting the last boat home?"

"No, I didn't. If I told him that I think he would have locked me up with a ball and chain on my ankle. I wonder what your other questions may be."

"You've half answered them already. I wanted to know if you've taken seriously the things Janina told of me."

"Well, Mr. Munson, Janina doesn't talk much about you, and I think it makes her wild when other girls do."

His lips parted; he drew in his breath, smiling and with relish. "But she warned you against me, didn't she?"

"Oh, I don't know, Mr. Munson, as I'd tell you quite all my secret hopes and thoughts and gossipings!"

"You do, Chickie. You tell much more than you think." He leaned toward her, his glance passing from clear, wide open eyes to the little pointed chin. From these he read her heart—young, ardent, wistful in its purity. Read it and had no doubts. For he was seasoned—not stern and skeptical and twenty-four. He went on slowly, moving his hand over till it rested on hers: "Much more, Chickie. You tell me all I want to know—except this last. Are you a little afraid of me? You don't exactly trust me?"

She shrugged gayly: "I don't know about that! When I was little I always thought bogies and ghosts came into the parlor at nights. So I used to close my eyes and dash past that closed door with all my might. And you know, I can still run—so if that's what you are!"

He laughed: "You'll not be running away from me, Chickie. You won't wish to run." He pressed her palm hard against the table, his eyes suddenly hot as though they poured fire into hers. She dropped her lids quickly, the blood sweeping into her face. A subtle quivering, more fear than expectance, shot through her.

CHAPTER XX

LURES

IN a mirror paneling the wall Chickie saw herself, hot cheeked and eager; she saw Munson, dark, intent, smiling. A sense of unreality pressed upon her. She kept wondering, but with a throb of astonished excitement: "Heavens! How do I happen to be here?"

Jake repeated after her, musing: "You've been working two and a half years and you like it. . . . I suppose you earn a fair salary?"

"I've been raised three times. You see, I'm very competent. Most people wouldn't suppose that."

"Why?"

"Janina says I have the look of angelic 'not thereness,' but whenever Mitchell wants special work done, he sends for me."

"Oh—he does! Do you like him?"

"Yes, I do. I like him better than any of the other men in the place."

"He's a good fellow. I know his family very well. His wife is a chum of my sister's. She's quite beautiful."

He regarded Chickie thoughtfully.

"He showed me her picture—and pictures of his two boys. They're awfully sweet."

"I suppose you'll stay at your job until your shiny and beautiful thing arrives? Is that your plan, Chickie?"

"Well—I guess I will unless we should suddenly make money in oil. Then we'd all flaunt off to Europe or to Honolulu or some place wonderful."

"Why count on oil for money?"

"Jonathan invested in oil last month. You see, my father has a paint shop, so he knows something about oils—naturally. He's always using them. And he got a gorgeous chance—so he took it, and we've had all kinds of fun ever since deciding what we'd do when the dividends come in."

Jake tapped with his fingers: "How much did your father put into this company?"

"I think it was \$500. Why do you look so impatient? It's one of the biggest fields in Texas. You ought to read some of the letters they've written us—oh, thrilling—they just make your heart spring open."

"Five hundred dollars—well, that's too bad. You want to tell your father to quit that, Chickie. Tell him not to put another cent into it."

She asked in a chill, flat tone, leaning forward anxiously: "You don't think it will pay?"

"I don't think you will go to Europe on any money you get from your Texas oil company. But don't worry about it, Chickie. If you want to travel, you will."

"What makes you say that? You know, inside of me, I've always believed that I would. I've seen myself on a great steamer, rolled up in a soft rug and a waiter bringing me tea. I've seen myself galloping across the desert, like Domine in the 'Garden of Allah.' But look—I'm twenty, and none of these dazzling things have happened yet."

"I should say, then, that twenty is a good time for them to begin. You've never taken a long trip? Too bad we didn't know each other last year. I took the yacht to Honolulu—ten of us—we had a royal time. Would you like that, Chickie?"

Behind the glistening of her eyes there flashed a quick, startled inquiry, but Jake went on carelessly: "I've been wanting to take a run down to Santa Barbara. If we have some good weather in October I may. Could you get off for a week or two, Chickie? I'd like to have you along."

She felt a furious little knock-knock at her throat; a hot glow spreading upward over her ears. She turned her spoon slowly in the ice cream. She heard herself presently answer: "I've never been in Santa Barbara."

"Beautiful there in Spring or Autumn—any time."

"We'll have to arrange it—"

"I've had my vacation this year. I couldn't—"

"Why, my dear? Since you're so competent, do you think Mitchell will take a chance at losing you? If he does, there are plenty of jobs in the world."

"Oh, no, there aren't! Not just now—not good ones."

"What's a good job for a girl, Chickie? Do you think the chance to earn just enough to eat and wear fairly decent clothes is a good job? Why, look at yourself—you're twenty—you

want shiny and beautiful things. You can grace them. Now, when you're young and beautiful, you ought to have them. But have you?"

Chickie laughed. "Young and so beautiful, indeed! I suppose that's what that girl shoplifter thought when she helped herself to the sable coat and the French beaded bag and all sorts of silk lingerie. Of course I should have them. I look in the windows and I know that no one could be more entrancing than I decked out like the Queen of Sheba. But what's to be done when God makes us poor and humble?"

"Don't blame the good God for these things! You can grab off your share if you just put out your hand."

"Well, I don't know about that, Mr. Munson. You said it before, but I see people putting out their hands all the time, and they grab off a great deal more than they wanted. The excess is usually trouble."

"I'll tell you why, Chickie. The people you speak of—your friend Mary, for instance, knew what she wanted. But she let her emotions rise in a sneak tide and bear her to the very opposite shore. The tide goes back and there she is stranded—her mind the dupe of her body—compelled to accept and carry the burdens her blind feelings have heaped upon her."

"Oh, I can't believe that, Mr. Munson. Mary would fly at you if you said it to her."

"And in her heart she will some day come to realize its truth. With Mary the tide may still be coming in. But there are plenty of women in the world who have watched it recede, leaving them stripped and broken on the shore."

"Do you mean by this that you don't believe in love or in marriage?"

"Not at all. I only mean that a girl—all girls need the soft and gentle things of life. They shouldn't have to grow old and hard working in offices for them. And they shouldn't let a young, foolish love that never does last cheat their lives of all the brighter pleasures. You think that yourself, Chickie. You don't want to let yourself slide into a marriage that means washing dishes and cooking and scrimping and half a dozen children"—he was laughing at her softly—"do you?"

"I'm not thinking of marriage or love."

"Then, Chickie, you just begin to think about it, or otherwise it will swoop down on you like the wolf on the fold. You better

have a good stout, barbed-wire fence to keep it off unless you want to be devoured."

She tossed her head flippantly: "That's the worst of it, though! Mary says when it comes you want to be devoured!"

"Mary is a wise child. The sad thing is this—it only devours the heart and the happiness—it leaves the mind stalking about in bitterness to mourn the loss."

She sighed unhappily: "You think all marriage is a failure then? All love ends miserably?"

He looked into her ardent, seeking eyes—a momentary sadness in his. He shook his head slowly. "That's your belief, Chickie. You said that people who grab never get anything but trouble. But I say you only have to thrust your hand in the right nest. You can't draw the golden egg from a mud hen. I say there are plenty of golden eggs in the world and it's the young and the beautiful who should have them. You and I, for instance!"

He was paying the waiter. She noticed that he put a \$10 bill on the plate and very little of it came back. She had a strained, frightened sensation at this guilty extravagance.

But when Jake established her with a smiling tenderness in the sedan she let herself sink back joyously in the soft luxury. The happy, gentle things of life—like silk next to her skin—ah—indeed she wanted them. She closed her eyes, drew a long, dreamy breath.

Jake, hearing that, pressed her hands, hunching his shoulder down cozily.

The rain tossed against the windows blurred the lights into dim, shifting eyes. He drove out and out. Curled low on the seat, she called out blithely: "Home, James!"

"Yes—presently—we have a few moments yet." He drove the car down a side road in the park. The wind whirled about the ground in eddies, dashed the rain in thin, silver mists against the trees.

He said in his firm, intimate way: "So you have your own ideas on this and that, but all the same, when you settled down here you felt happy, didn't you?"

"Yes—very—"

"Why, Chickie? I'll tell you. It's because you know you have a right to this—because you feel at home here—isn't that it?"

"Maybe! I told you I can quite enjoy riches and such."

"Yes—" He put his arm about her. Instinctively she stiffened. He leaned down and looked into her face. "Why did you do that?"

She wouldn't answer. He went on, his eyes demanding, earnest. "Is it that you don't like me?"

"No—it's not that."

"Or that you're in love with some one else?"

She shook her head, fearful, not knowing what to do. Seeing the white of her neck, his lips trembled, an immense desire, a luminous tenderness swept through him. He touched her hands. He said softly: "You dear! Never mind—I won't keep you late to-night."

CHAPTER XXI

GOLDEN DAYS

BARRY DUNNE took a box from the drawer of his chiffonier—a small box, but in it there were a dozen tiny leather volumes. He put it in his pocket and went out whistling. Warm in his thought there glowed a face—pretty eyes, but, ah—the lips. Something in her head, too! Little wonder—little dream. She liked poetry—the clever thing—knew the best ones, too.

When he stood before Chickie he pulled out the box shyly, shoving it quietly to the table.

"For me, Mr. Red? You bring me little packages in your pocket? Oh, I love that! What can it be?"

"The whole darn earth, Chickie! It's every worth-while thing that ever was. Here it is!"

She laughed happily, surprised to find herself all at once in the gayest spirits. All day she had moved about in a thrill of dark, mysterious excitement.

Her thoughts kept returning to the evening before—to the dinner with Jake—the moment when his hand had pressed her palm against the table, his eyes pouring fire into hers. It caught her with a little pang of curious terror.

In the midst of her work her mind drifted off into a dreamy speculation. She wondered with a touch of pathos about herself—her future. Was some one magnificent, rich, happy hearted waiting for her? Just around the corner might she one day come face to face with this tremendous and glorious love?

And did this Jake, who seemed so kind, so exuberantly satisfied with life, really have cruel, vicious thoughts against her? No—she wouldn't believe that—yet there ran through all her musings a dark, tight thread of half frightened suspense. He was a problem. She wondered how she should act; what she should say.

With Barry Dunne it was different. . . . Young like herself—free—out in the sun—nothing to fear—

She pulled the paper from the box: "The whole darn earth?"

Tish, 'tis no more than I expect! Oh, books— So you want me to read you to sleep again?"

"Say—how did you guess that? How about Sunday, Chickie? We can take another ride down the lane—sit under that tree. Now, listen, don't turn round and give me the cold eye. I said we can sit quietly under the trees—a Summer idyll as it were—just these and I—sans jug, sans kiss, sans anything!"

She answered jubilant: "Except a little lunch—some sandwiches?"

"That you'll make with your little fingers? Ah—delish!"

When he was leaving, he said, "You won't change that date, will you, Chickie? In case anything else turns up?"

"No—nothing will turn up."

She found herself looking forward to Sunday with a tightened heart. She saw herself sitting under the tree as she had before, his head against her arm.

Jake stopped her Friday as she came from lunch. The way he looked at her; the way he held her hand gave her a queer feeling as though he put his arms about her on the street.

"I meant to see you before, Chickie. I've been out of town. Suppose we make up for last Monday. Going to be a wonderful day on the bay. How will you like that?"

"I can't, Mr. Munson. I have another date."

"Can't you break it? Make it worth your while. I'll have a race staged for you. I'd like it a heap, Chickie, if you'd break that date for me. You know you owe it to me."

She shook her head. To her surprise, she felt no regret.

Sunday came with a rush of Indian Summer in its soft, uplifting breath. Barry Dunne carried out the box to the spot where Chickie had packed sandwiches all wrapped in wax paper.

"Say, isn't this merry, though, I thought up to the last minute you were going to call it off."

"Why—and you such a devil of a fellow with the ladies?"

"Well, I thought anyway that you'd ask me to shift about and go on the yacht."

"Did Jake ask you, too?"

"Yes—I think he had a hunch we were beating it off together. He tried all ways to get me along." He turned his eyes searchingly to her face, his own a little hard, doubting: "Most girls fall for a fellow like Jake. He's quite a killer. Don't you think so?"

"He's handsome—and, of course, he has big cars and lots of money."

"Sure—that's the bait for the girls of to-day. If a fellow has the coin in his pocket it doesn't make a bit of difference to them if he hasn't a hair on his head or a thought in his brain."

She laughed merrily: "You find the competition hard to meet, Mr. Red? You seem to be carrying it off quite jauntily. I'd like to tell you that the redoubtable Jake, with his money and his cars, failed to catch one little fish not so very far away from yourself. You see, I kept the date anyway!"

He wanted to be made sure of this. When they sat under the tree eating their lunch, he came back to it. He was filled with curiosity about her, but more poignantly he wondered what she saw in him. She couldn't in her heart prefer him to a wonderful fellow like Jake Munson.

Her hair was glinting in the sun. The breeze blew it in shimmering threads across her white forehead. He put up his hand and drew it back. "Will you tell me something truthfully, Chickie?"

She answered absently, because a great sweetness was rushing in and filling up her heart: "Maybe, if it's a pleasant question."

"Did you keep the date because you said you would or because you wanted to?"

She laughed softly: "How vain we are, for all your red hair and your vanished freckles."

"Please—I can't enjoy myself unless you tell me."

"Indeed! I kept it because I wished to."

"Oh, you darling. Turn your face this way—there—how do they make them like that, I'd like to know?"

He began asking her all manner of questions: Did she read much? Did she intend to keep on working always? What did she think of marriage? And finally: "Chickie, how many times have you been engaged?"

"Oh, you idiot. Now, I might think that was Mary talking. Why, never."

"You've been in love, though—you were handing me out a tall line about never kissing fellows—"

Her face grew suddenly sober, then she tossed her head with a laugh: "Such a nerve as a man has! Like Jimmy—he said the very same things. Why, you'd think yourself a prize booby if

you didn't kiss every girl you could. Why not us? Why should there be one rule for you and another for us?"

"There isn't! Not any more. But if a girl thinks she has a right to do these things, why does she deny it?"

"They don't. Janina doesn't."

"You say there should be only the one rule, Chickie. If that's so, then you should believe in kissing and kiss!"

"Indeed, that's like a man, all right. Suppose the one rule I'd have should be 'no kissing either for thee or for me.' I think abstinence would be especially fine for a man."

He took her hands and turned them over, laughing. "That's on your tongue—all that. It's not in your heart. I'm here to shout it's not in mine!"

"Read to me! That will keep your lips busy."

Sitting on the ground next to him, listening to his voice, she had a wish that recurred like some soft, drowsy perfume drifting in her face—a wish to lean back against his shoulder—to close her eyes dreamily. She would have been glad to let him sleep against her arm—let her fingers loiter on his face.

He read on and on. He stopped over his favorites and sometimes quoted whole stanzas, asking her opinion. She gave it with a grand, princess air, hoping eagerly she said the right thing.

Finally he closed the book. "Some things are awfully hard on the lips, Chickie." He pulled her to her feet.

The sun was caught in a great black splash of clouds. He put his arm about her waist, whispered softly in her ear, "Ah, 'tis a beauteous evening, calm and free—and thou, dear girl that walkest with me here—like to walk on and on and hate to walk back?"

He looked down at her and laughed. She felt his heart thumping—a deadly stillness in her own. An impulse that suddenly charged over her like a rush of hot tears made her turn—made her reach out her hand to him.

He caught it. He said with a gasp, "Chickie! Oh, you darling!"

She stood there and let his arms sweep about her. She raised her face. She said "No." But she waited, moveless—waited, trembling.

He put his arms swift to her shoulders, he drew her, whispering. "You darling!" He kissed her.

His face was white. He turned her hands upward and

kissed them. He said, breathless, looking into her face: "Chickie, you're beautiful. You are!"

She wished the world would end—then—too sweet to bear. They walked down the hill silent.

Afterward it frightened her. She lay awake, clasping her hands hard against her heart. She said to herself, half aloud: "No! Not again. No!"

CHAPTER XXII

DISILLUSION

"HAVING a pretty gay time, Chickie?" Jimmy had a hard grip on her arm, holding her back so that she was forced to walk slowly.

She felt his eyes draw sharply against her profile. She answered lightly, yet with a disturbing pang, "Oh, salubrious, Jimmy!"

"Which is it going to be, the red-head or the rich one?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Which are you going to marry?"

"Why—the idea—"

"Well, you don't have to tell me, I suppose. You're not engaged yet?"

"Of course not! I'm not even thinking of it."

He shut his lips tightly. Without looking at him, Chickie knew that his face kindled with excitement. Her fingers touched his and were caught in a harsh clasp. He forced out his next question after a long, jagged pause. "I suppose—humph—I'm out of it altogether, Chickie?"

She turned her hand in his. "Jimmy, you make me feel terrible. I'm not going to get married—not for years and years. Why—just because I'm having a little fun. You go out yourself, don't you? Why—I won't think of settling down—"

"You say that, but look here, Chickie! It's none of my damn business, but you're not trying out any of that wild stuff you told me about, are you?"

"Wild stuff?" Her breath caught in a little gasp. "Jimmy, you old funny! Well, listen to the darling!"

"Aw, don't kid about it, Chickie!" He doubled up his fists, a-swinging along, truculent. "If I thought you were treating those fellows to any petting parties I'd lie around here and knock their blocks off!"

Her face, suddenly white, flashed against his with hurt indignation. He turned from it brusquely.

"I didn't mean it, Chickie. Honestly. Forget it, please. I

know you better than that, I guess. But gee whiz—" When she didn't answer, he said in his quick, impulsive way, looking at her humbly, "Look here, Chickie, are you going to get sore at me, after all these years? Say—can't I even pull the brother stuff, any more?"

"But just the same, Jimmy, that was pretty cruel."

"Maybe it was. But I happen to know a thing or two about fellows. It makes me kind of wild thinking about you and things—" He searched her face, an agony of tenderness in his look. She was all at once in a tumult—her eyes filled. He said, huskily, "Aw, Chickie—don't—I didn't mean a word of it. You know I didn't. Don't I know you, though!"

They reached her door just as a delivery boy brought up a huge basket of flowers. Without seeming to notice, Jimmy said, "Good-by, Chickie."

She took the basket and ran into her room. Autumn flowers of gold and orange with long trailing ribbons of blue larkspur. Jake's card. The third basket in two weeks.

Heat swept over her in a rapid, throbbing wave, made her ears pound. She stared at the flaunting beauty of the shaggy chrysanthemums.

She was hearing Jimmy; listening to a sudden wild storm of questions breaking in her own mind. He knew fellows—Did he?

She had refused obstinately to look at the world except as she wished to see it—a lovely, delightful place—full of good times—wondrous Sundays under a tree with some one happy of heart—luxurious evenings with a princely, lavish fellow like Jake. Why should one ask more? One could go on in this happy carelessness years and years. So she assured herself.

Now she was remembering things Jake said—his eyes possessing hers—hand warm, insistent on hers. She drew a hard, excited breath—trembling.

She jumped back with alarm when she found Jennie leaning over her shoulder, saying in a happy complacent tone, "From Mr. Munson, Chickie?"

"Oh, mother! You frightened me. Yes—Mr. Munson."

Jennie touched the flowers dreamily, a smile on her lips. "Do you care for him, Chickie?"

"Why, mother! Such things as you ask! I've only known the man well about a month."

"You've seen a great deal of him. And he sends you these

flowers. He isn't a boy, Chickie. You must remember it's not right to trifle with a man's heart."

"Oh, ho, mother! Don't make me larf!" She was about to give some flippant, caustic rejoinder, but she turned and saw Jennie's plump neck with a thin straggle of hair falling from the amber comb; Jennie's white apron tied in a neat bow at her waist. She thought with a clutch of pity at her throat: "Lot you know, Jennie! Lot you know of men!"

She went back with heightened agitation to her own questions. What were the things Jimmy knew about fellows? Did he mean all of them—Barry, too? No—she wouldn't have that—

But Jake? Things he said of marriage, of love, of Mary, came now hot, stabbing into her mind. Was he only sounding her out?

She went over to the window and stared a long time into the back garden. If the world was like this; if men had only such thoughts in their minds—well—her eyes blinked. She closed them with a stinging bitterness.

Behind her were joyous weeks that had swept her along on a sparkling, quick tide of happiness. Barry, grinning at her from his window; meeting her at noon and rushing her off to lunch. When his eyes met hers a surging restlessness charged through her. She found herself often looking at his mouth—beautifully chiseled—so young. He caught her once or twice; with a merry twinkle drew his lips together: "Ready, willing and waiting—ah—you sweet thing—" She wanted to crush her heart down; make it cold; make it still.

She turned with impulsive relief to Jake Munson; went with him to the best shows; allowed him to send flowers, take her to dinner. Oh, he was the vital, exultant fellow. She sat back easily, giving full rein to her careless flippancy, flattered to the marrow when his black, flashing eyes took fire.

She was going to dinner with him to-night. In the center of the basket were orchids. She pinned them on her coat. Jonathan came in and closed her door softly after him. He said in a solemn whisper: "Chickie, I like this Mr. Munson all very well, but you're seeing too much of him. I don't want you to throw yourself at anybody." Calmly—without meaning the slightest hurt.

But she, already nervous because of Jimmy, turned sharply, tears spurting into her eyes: "Jonathan! All right! I'll not go

—you can just go in and tell him—” She tore off her gloves.

He came over, shocked, and made her face him. “You don’t want your father to speak to you, Chickie? Is that it?”

“Jonathan! Such a time as you take to say things! Now, I’m going to cry— That’s a fine way to treat a person—”

She lowered her head quickly. He drew her to him; helped her with the glove. “There, now, I didn’t mean to get you on edge, Chickie, girl, come—kiss your old dad. You know he can’t mind his own business.”

She went out shaken, all her uneasiness quickened.

At the hotel she took off her coat, as she always did, because she was ashamed and uncomfortable in its shabbiness. Its black wolf collar was matted. But it had cost \$90 and had to give two years’ full service. Jake waited, a teasing smile on his lips. “You treat that poor coat roughly, Chickie. Don’t you like it?”

“Oh, yes! So chic—the only one of its kind in captivity—praise be to heaven for that!”

He caught and remembered the hidden vehemence in her tones.

They entered the great, quiet dignity of the big room. It had a mature, settled air about it—old people at many of the tables; women with shriveled necks and diamond collared; men with forlorn, chill air, like fireplaces where the embers are turning gray.

Jake nodded to the party near them—a couple, aged forty; a child of seven and the grandmother—a stocky, massive little person with very short arms that moved rhythmically and with sharp determination to her mouth. She was obviously the purse of the family. On the back of her chair was a long coat of chin-chilla lined with rose crêpe.

“Look at that old ruin, Chickie, decked out in the flowers of May. Isn’t that sardonic? Life loves a jest like that! When we’re young and can mightily rejoice, she pushes us into the treadmill. When we’re old and can no longer smell, she throws a rose in our lap. What fools we are if we don’t grab off the flowers while we still can drink their fragrance. Not so?”

“Shall I step forth, kind sir, and pick off the old dame’s chinchilla?”

“Why not? What isn’t given to you, take!” He pushed his plate, leaning forward, touched her hand. “You’d look wonderful in that, Chickie.”

"Reach it for me, will you, please? She's very busy eating. If you're clever we might get away with it."

He shrugged. "Funny, isn't it, the way the world looks at some things. This for example. Now, it would give me a tremendous kick to hand you some of the soft, beautiful things of life. I'd love to do it. What would six or seven hundred mean to me, and the fun you'd get out of it. But if I did, you'd immediately think I was some kind of a monster, and old woman Grundy would rear her hundred hands in horror. All that prevents a lot of happy, kind things—"

Chickie smiled. "Well, Mr. Munson, if you're so anxious to give some poor working gell like me all that fun, why don't you pick out one and send her a diamond tiara, anonymous like."

Little glints came into his flashing eyes. "You don't believe me. I'll show you that I'm in earnest. I mean to show you that, Chickie."

Later, when they were settled back in the limousine, he put his arm about her. "You like me, Chickie?"

"Yes."

"You know that you mean a great deal—everything—to me?"

"No."

"You do; yes. I've never felt so before. I'm telling you the truth. I'd love to do some fine, pleasant things for you—give you a lot of joy. Chickie—" He had both her hands pressed in his. He was leaning down, his face came nearer.

She moved back with a start. "No—don't."

"Chickie, don't you know—it's a year—a whole year. I love you. I want you. Oh, you dear. Look up at me, please. Put your arms about me. I want it so."

She sat rigid against him, a white, chill thing of fear coiled in her heart. Suddenly she covered her face and cried. His arms dropped as though he were shot.

CHAPTER XXIII

JAKE'S GIFT

JAKE leaned forward and whispered something to the chauffeur. He took Chickie's hands gently, watching her with hot, intent eyes. "Why did you cry, Chickie?"

She answered in a very low tone: "I didn't cry."

"Why did you cover your face then?"

"I don't know—everything—all at once. Oh, I didn't want you to say that. You don't love me. I know it. You only say that. It spoils everything."

He pressed her hands against his knee. Suddenly he leaned down, forcing her head up. "I love you, Chickie—terribly. I want you. I'd give the world to have you put your arms about me. I want that. I want it! Oh, you dear—" The red mouth curved in a warm, flashing smile, his eyes glowed softly into hers: "Chickie—kiss me—just once—let me—"

She put her hand up between them. She sat perfectly still, staring at him, his lips moving over her palm. He caught both her wrists, drawing her arms down in a sudden violence. His eyes, alight, swept over her face. Holding her so, he murmured: "I love you—you don't know—you little white darling—please—"

She closed her eyes—hearing his breath. Presently he freed her hands. He looked at her smiling, quiet, exultant: "Chickie, dear, I couldn't help that. It's the way you look. I'd give the world—"

"Don't say it again—please—"

"But I would. I will—you dear—wait—I mean it—I love you."

When he left her at the door he leaned down and whispered in her ear, "I love you—you dear!"

She went into her room and began undressing in a swift, breathless excitement. The acuteness of her sensations, the half-terrified thrill surprised and horrified her. She looked at her hands, feeling vividly the movement of his lips.

Her thought was submerged in her emotion that kept stealing

over her in waves, repeating "I love you"—bringing his lips to her ear; his eyes glowing into hers.

Did he love her? Did he mean it? "Little white darling—" She blushed to find herself wondering; more than half believing.

Her memories distracted her all the next morning. By noon she began to fear that she might meet him on the street. She was uncertain what to do. She wanted desperately to talk; ask some one's opinion—in a roundabout way.

Janina was home; she had a sprained ankle. Suddenly Chickie decided she would visit her. Janina knew Jake Munson—she would find out if those things Janina said were true.

Janina's apartment, which she was pleased to call her "studio," was on the top floor of big flats in Union Street. Four dark flights of stairs led to the single great room.

Half way up Chickie paused for breath. A big window let in the sun at this landing. In the light she saw, suddenly, a quick, elastic figure—a boy, yellow haired, stormy eyed, a youthful petulance in his chin. Seeing Chickie, the blood swept into his cheeks. He passed on quickly.

When she knocked, Janina said "Come in."

Sun streamed like a great, golden canopy across the long room, warmed up the faded old chintz drapes, made the place, now massed with flowers, seem like some quiet Italian garden.

Janina, her face flushed, a tense, bright unrest in her eyes, lay on a couch, reading. She wore a negligee of orange. When Chickie entered she didn't turn. She said softly, "Come here, Chaffee—I won't do that again."

Glimpsing Chickie, she gazed at her moodily: "Did you see any one going down the stairs?"

"Yes."

She closed her book with a shrug: "I'll tell you something I've just discovered, Chickie. There's a chance for a new God. Let him create a world without sex. We'll have Utopia—not before."

"I didn't think sex was any problem to you. I thought you had it all settled."

Her lip curled: "We don't settle that problem; it settles us. Well, how goes it with you and Jake?"

Chickie answered lightly: "I've been to more good shows in a short time than I've seen in all my life before."

Janina watched her narrowly: "Enjoy it while you may.

With Jake, Chickie, the flower that once has bloomed forever dies."

Chickie asked with a passion of eagerness she tried to conceal: "Oh, Janina, do you really believe that? Do you think men never take out a girl just for the gayety of it—just because they have a happy, friendly feeling for her?"

"Sure they do. Lots of them don't want to get in deep—poor, young fellows like Barry Dunne, for instance."

"But the others? You think a man like Jake has always some evil motive in his mind?"

"Evil—" Janina dismissed the word with a swift gesture of scorn. "What do you mean by 'evil'? Jake's got a wealth of life, that's all. What's evil about that? Oh, this bunk makes me sick! Is it evil to breathe? To eat? To run? I suppose I'm about the vilest thing this side of the inferno. Why? Because I have blood in my veins? Because it gets red hot?" She flicked the ashes from her cigarette. After a long puff: "What is evil, Chickie? Can you answer that?"

"It's evil to tamper with things that were given for a great and holy purpose."

Janina drawled, with an amused smile, "Where'd you learn that, baby?"

"Don't make fun of me, Janina, I learned it from Martha Blake. She's read as many books as you have, and she seems to get a wonderful joy out of living."

"Great and holy purpose, I suppose, is children? Is that Martha's answer?"

"I suppose it is."

"Well, it listens good, Chickie, until you look around and see some of these great and holy purposes in the flesh—poor fellows, doomed to sweep streets all their mortal days, children slaving in factories, old maids going into blue, lonely graves—all the dumb beasts that wouldn't give a hang if they were never born. Think they praise the Marthas for their great and holy purposes? Not much! Why, this earth could do very nicely with about half its present population. Increase the quality, cut down on the numbers. Real Malthus, girl. So that answers you there. Now, what's evil?"

Chickie, listening to Janina, had a scourging sense of outrage, as though white delicate flowers were torn in rough bits. She rallied valiantly: "But it takes all the beauty out of love, Janina, if you make it so common. It isn't any longer a great, sweep-

ing thing, that you'd be glad to wait all your life to meet. You can't love every one—"

Janina shrugged. "You're a little hypocrite, Chickie! Like all the 'good people.' Do you mean to sit there and tell me that Jake Munson could put his arm around you and you didn't like it? You didn't find it quite sweet and beautiful enough? You bet you did! But they've hypnotized women so long, we've been ashamed of our instincts until we discovered them about five or ten years ago. For a hundred centuries men have done as they pleased; the race seems to have survived. Now, because women are stepping into the sun, hear them shout! We're sending the world to ruin. Too bad! I guess the old world will wag on willy-nilly—"

She turned suddenly to Chickie with a sweet insinuation. "So Jake's worrying you, is he?"

"He isn't anything of the kind! Well, you don't have to believe it, Janina. It's true, though."

"You mean to tell me you've been trotting high and wide for the last month or more—"

"Oh, I'm not trying to tell you anything."

Janina stared at her. Chickie met it coolly. Then Janina said, with her lips white: "It would be like Jake to fall for you—the price of him!"

When Chickie reached home she found a little package on her bureau. Jennie called to her from the kitchen, but she closed her door quietly, pretending not to hear.

In the gray satin box a long bar pin of sapphires gleamed, silky, beautiful; Jake Munson's card—four words written very small: "Because I love you."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SHOW DOWN

SHE laid the pin in her palm, turning the limpid stones. She tried it against her white waist.

Flushing hotly, she heard Jennie at her door: "There's a package for you, Chickie. Did you see it? I wonder what it is?"

The pin was snatched out, dropped nervously down her blouse. "Oh—it was my bracelet. The clasp was loose. I had it fixed."

The stones were cold. Her skin, like a fire melting them. She pressed them against her, drawing her breath hard, swelling. With a queer hotness flashing over her, she reached for the pin, looked at it a long time—in a dream.

Finally she rolled it in a handkerchief, hid it under a night-gown in her bureau drawer.

During dinner the thought of it transfixed her as though its point went through her brain. She helped Jennie with the dishes, talking eagerly, exerting herself to unusual sweetness, as one does when a sense of guilt separates him from the things he loves.

She kept wondering with uneasy pangs, "What shall I do?" She had an image of herself calling Jake on the phone, then of writing a note, sending the gift back. She did none of these things.

Instead, she went in and undid the box again, taking out his card, staring at the four words, "Because I love you." Of its own accord, absently, her mind began to build, using Janina's white-lipped comment as the keystone: "It would be like Jake to fall for you—the price of him!" Jake might wish to marry her; he might really love her. Janina meant that. The thought flushed warmly—lit a soft, triumphant fire in her heart.

But at night, when she lay in bed, she was able to think coldly. He had given Amy Heaton a diamond pin; some one

said Edith Ridge had a mate for it. Jake was a princely giver. Perhaps he had written the same words to them. She stole softly to the bureau and, kneeling on the floor, put the pin in the box and wrapped it up.

Bitterness, like a rat, gnawed at her breast. She would give it back—she would have to. He would be angry—perhaps insulted.

And the high-exultant tide she had ridden so happily this last month would end. She no longer would laze down joyously in a limousine—no longer be carried off radiant to the best shows, elaborate dinners.

It would end now. He had placed his cards on the table. It meant a showdown. She could no longer bluff herself—no longer evade. Men didn't give wondrous sapphire pins just because they had a happy, friendly feeling for a girl. There was but one thing to do. She saw it quite piercingly.

But no sooner was the revelation clear than she turned from it with the obstinacy of a child. Old stuff! All right in Jennie's day—flowers, candy or books—nothing else from a man to a girl. No one paid any attention to that now. Even Jimmy gave her a little turquoise pendant when she was sixteen. She had it yet.

As though Jake Munson gave a second thought to a gift like that. She would make herself ridiculous refusing it.

The stones were beautiful—they brought out gentle lights in her eyes; they gleamed with chaste passion against the white of her waist. She needed a pin like that—she wanted it. Her imagination took possession of it.

Later—if she discovered Jake counted on the pin to win her; if he expected it to make any difference between them, why, she could return it then. She could toss it back with a "Pooh, keep it!"

The next morning she happened to glance from the window at Barry Dunne, his head lowered, paring his nails, exactly as she had seen him first. He looked upward slowly, gave her a beckoning wink, all glee, all buoyance. She flushed crimson.

Her heart knocked with a guilty rush, as though she stood before him revealed; her thought cringed before the high purity she imagined his. She could have taken the pin then and flung it from the window.

At noon she was rushing down California Street, excited by

her own unrest. She had her hand in her pocket, covering the box with the sapphires.

Some one bumped against her—put out arms to stop her. It was Jake.

Like a spring her hand bobbed up, the box with it. She thrust it at him. "Here, Mr. Munson. I can't take this. I don't want it."

She faltered, expecting to see him start back—to turn ashen—to pass on without a word.

He took her arm in a cozy, laughing way. "Ho, there; giddyap! Don't have to knock me down with your righteousness, do you, gurrl? Where shall we go for lunch?"

He dropped the box back in her pocket. She walked on, her eyes straight before her.

"You can't do that, Mr. Munson."

"I know. You said you didn't want it. You fling it back at me. But please carry it for a block. My pockets are filled. We'll see what can be done about it."

"You think I don't mean it. I do."

"And a lot of things I mean. And you insist that I don't. Let's straighten them out."

"I didn't intend going to lunch with you."

"That's all right, Chickie, dear. No malice of forethought necessary. You weren't intending to cut me off without one last farewell, were you?"

Hurrying along and he towering over her and people giving him glad, pleased greetings, she heard already, like a soft whimper in her ears, her own defeat. He thought nothing of it; he had no dark, terrible motives. He would suppose she was one of those girls who imagine things.

Seated in a far corner of the Golden Pheasant, he pushed knives and forks out of his way: "Now, let's have it, Chickie. Why all the sudden frenzy?"

"That's all there's to it. I can't take that pin."

"Don't you like it?"

"Yes—it's beautiful."

"Why can't you take it?"

She glanced down at her plate, shoved her glass. "Why should you give me a thing like that?"

"Why shouldn't I? You have nothing like it. You need it. I can send you flowers from now till time ends and you

wouldn't raise any question. This is a much wiser appreciation—that's all. I wanted to give you something—" His voice suddenly became low and rapid: "Chickie, was there a card with the pin? Was there a message?"

When she didn't answer, his eyes compelled her. With astonishment she found in them a pleading, intent anxiousness, like the look of Jimmy. He said hurriedly: "That's why I should give it to you, Chickie."

She waited in a spasm of suspense, curious, yet reluctant to hear more. His expression underwent a subtle change as though a lid were put down softly on some inner fire.

He said with a whimsical smile: "So you've been thinking of all the things the black wench told you, Chickie? Wouldn't it be a lot fairer if you give me a chance on my own account? I want to tell you that I honestly bought that pin just to give you a kick. I hadn't a notion of doing it until we were talking the other night and that old mummy was shining there like the Tower of Jewels. You had your flowers pinned on with a rusty old nail. That's incongruous, you know!

"Why, Chickie, beautiful things belong to you. And you start in raising a fuss when a little trinket comes your way. Well—don't, because I intend to buy you any bauble I please. Now, that's that."

She protested weakly. "No—I don't want you to. And I can't keep this—"

"It's yours, Chickie. If you hand it back now, I'll throw it on the floor and stamp on it or I'll give it to the waitress as a tip."

She laughed: "Oh—is it a novelty?"

He looked at her with a sudden earnestness: "I'm half afraid, Chickie, that it isn't! Now don't let's begin it all again. Didn't you tell me once that when you found bogies in the parlor, you closed your eyes and ran? Well—don't run when there are no bogies. Chickie—put it on and wear it and God bless you. Do—" He laughed, his eyes surveying her with a pleased humor.

She felt relieved and glad and triumphant. She put the pin in her waist.



A First National Picture.

"Chickie."

"CHICKIE, IT'S YOURS—" MUNSON FALTERED.



CHAPTER XXV

LOVE'S HANDICAP

It made no difference between them. It seemed only to heighten the half smiling gallantry of his manner. Often his eyes dwelt on hers with a sudden look of startled eagerness, like Jimmy's. Then an amused glint would pass into them, like a shade pulled down.

Yet for a long time Chickie didn't wear Jake's sapphires. She kept them in her drawer, hidden. She tried them on at night.

One Sunday morning when she and Barry Dunne were going for a walk, she wore a tweed suit with a white waist that had a little frilled collar. And impulsively she took out the pin and set it at the neck. She was so delighted with the effect that she stuck it in, saying to herself, with an impatient trembling: "Oh, keep still! Why shouldn't I?"

It was morning, a soft wind blowing. They stood at the beach against some tall, weedy grasses, watching a man and a girl running into the waves. Chickie was remembering with a wistful smile that Sunday so long ago when she and Arthur Sontag had come out here and she had been so tremulous and brave with young emotion. She felt like that now—only then it had been as though gentle, distant hands played lightly over the keys of her heart, raising a faint music, poignant in its sweetness. Now the hands were quick and vital, as though they would sweep into tremendous chords.

By a strange coincidence Barry turned to her and, as he often did, pushed a few blown hairs from her forehead. He said, laughingly: "Ah—hasn't she the pretty eyes?" And noticed the pin. "Hey—what's this!" He fingered it, turned her so that the sun caught in the soft blue fires. "What a beauty. I never saw that before. Had it a long time?"

Her throat felt dry and tight. "Got it yesterday. Pretty nifty, isn't it? Three seventy-five over the counter of the Novelty Shop."

"That so? Humph—they make those things pretty good,

don't they? Its own mother of glass wouldn't know it in that setting from the real thing."

After a moment he said absently, "You love stunning things, don't you?"

"Who doesn't?"

"But yet you say money doesn't make much difference to you."

"That's never what I said. It would make a heap of difference to me. I only said I wouldn't marry a man just because he was rich and could give me all the things I'd like. I wouldn't marry a man unless I loved him so much that I couldn't be happy a moment without him."

He nodded, winking: "Wouldn't be very hard to love a fellow who could toss you a limousine for breakfast, a country estate for lunch and a diamond necklace for dinner, would it?"

She sighed, but all her pulses grew warm and quickened. She said flippantly: "May I take this as a proposal, Red, you wistful thing?"

"You may not, fair one. This is a mere question—sounding the depths of the crystal spring, as it were."

"Then I can afford to be truthful, I suppose, though poor, proud goils like me find lies much better economy. Well, I'll say that one Helena Bryce could much enjoy country estates, limousines and diamonds. As for marriage, however, I'd just as lief dispense with it for four or five years."

"You would? Why?"

"Marriage is the beginning of the end. No more adventure. No more gayety. It always seems to me that a girl just goes down into a tunnel to live out her days in darkness."

"Optimistic, aren't you? But if she brings enough love with her, isn't that supposed to light up the dungeon?"

"So they say. But I think the love light only blinds her so that she doesn't know she's going into the dungeon—"

He laughed and took the words from her: "Until she strikes her foot against a cold, rough stone and stumbles and the light goes out. Then she knows what she's got into! Humph, lots of ways out of that tunnel to-day. People enter it as they do a gambling game—to win. If they lose, they quit."

"That's terrible, I think."

"Well, I guess your plan is right. If you've got to go into a dungeon, be sure you bring the wherewithal to make it darn comfortable. If the light goes out, at least there'll be cushions

and chairs and grub around, and perhaps diamonds to give a sparkle."

Within her an excitement that she couldn't understand made her answer breathless: "I never said anything of the kind! I never once said I wouldn't marry a poor man."

"You did, too! Humph, a girl has a right to expect a few things when she signs up for life. Fellow'd have a nerve to expect her to sacrifice for him."

"They say when you love, you ache to sacrifice—that you even want to suffer."

"Would you, Chickie?"

"I don't know—I'd be afraid to think much about it."

He had hold of her hand and they faced each other, their eyes mingling in a long, startled glance that she felt going down like a silver blade into her heart. With a frightened bewilderment she found herself trembling, staring at his eyes, his mouth—waiting breathless and hoping. She said abruptly, with a little nervous laugh: "Well, take a good look, my dear!"

"I did! A pippin of a look. So it goes!"

They started walking down the wet, glistening sands. Chickie dug her toe into the softness, sending the grains flying. She wanted to run away, to get hold of the thing that quivered and stormed within her. Tears were at her eyes, so she kept looking out at the waters and saying: "Isn't the light strong? Heavens, it's dazzling."

He went on quietly, swinging her hand. Abruptly, he said: "There's something cruel in the present economic order, isn't there?"

"A great deal, I'd say—for instance, that one so young and beautiful as I should have to work; and one so strong and brave as thou should have to pinch. . . ."

"Yes—well, that's just it. Five or six years at least before I'll even begin to make a go of it. There's my mother, too. No matter what I might wish to do—I have to put it out of my thoughts. That's not right. There ought to be some new arrangement."

"Like what? Do you mean that old stuff about dividing the money all over again?"

He shook his head back, laughing, rubbing his hands: "No, ma'am!"

"Then what?"

"This dungeon question should be rearranged."

"Marriage?"

"How bright!"

"How would you have it?" She asked it softly and stole a hasty, flushed look into his eyes.

"Well, as it is now—most fellows who make their own way can't afford to marry until they're about thirty. A fellow can't throw up his whole future, even if he might wish to. But because he can't marry is no sign he won't love before that old age descends on him. Why shouldn't there be some scheme so that he'd have a right to this love? It's a part of life. Why should this everlasting postponement of living be demanded of us?"

A red stain spread slowly upward over her face. But she said valorously: "You mean there should be some substitute for marriage?"

He shrugged: "Well—they'll have that in fifty years at most. Lots of people you and I know to-day aren't waiting for the conventions to catch up with the little old nature, are they? But what I meant was more some adjustment between economics and emotions. For instance, some Edison ought to find a way to put us in a state of suspended animation until our pile is made. Then we would have the capacity and the means to enjoy it at once. As it is now, when we've made enough money to be able to live, we're ready to die."

"Ah—twee-twee—tombstones at our head and feet!" she said blithely enough. But she looked out at the immense gray water, feeling suddenly a forlorn, chill desolation. She said sadly: "Don't the emotions ever wait or last until the economics catch up with them?"

"I guess they do—that's the only hope, isn't it?" He laughed merrily and added, "But suppose the economics and the emotions wait, but the girl doesn't?"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BRIGHTER ROAD

CHICKIE combed her hair a long while—dreaming. Her thoughts went back to the morning as she walked along the beach, sending the sands flying. She put the comb down, looked at her hands. They were trembling.

“Five years at least before I’ll even begin to make a go of it. There’s my mother, too.” She wondered why she was dwelling on these words of Barry Dunne’s.

And she felt as though a luminous searchlight had suddenly been flung across her path. She saw herself going along now with Jake; now with Barry; her days made bright—full of a sparkling interest because of them.

She pulled her hair back tight from her forehead, screwed it into a knot on the top of her head—and laughed. But the weight that was loneliness or fear kept pressing like something bleak and heavy on her heart. Five or six years at least—

“Pooh! What about it!” Just what she wanted! She should go into the dungeon like Mary did! Any old time! Made it fine. They’d have all these years of freedom—walks on the beach—long rides—dancing—

But all the next day she didn’t once look across the alley. She had a forlorn, empty feeling that the window over there was closed, the shade drawn down.

On her way home she stopped in at Mary’s. She said to herself, flippantly, “Take a look at the dungeon.” She was suddenly consumed with interest in Mary. Was it so bad? Was Mary glad for all her sacrifices? Or in her secret thoughts was she envious of Chickie and her freedom? Would she be delighted if some one said: “Well, here’s five or six years—just do as you merrily please with them. Take a holiday from your life”?

Mary began at once to talk of Jake. “Have you come to tell me, Chickie? Jimmy says the machine is always at the door. You know, I always fancied you sweeping grandly along, a bird of paradise in your hair, an ermine train at your feet. What about it?”

"Nothing. Why should you wish these things on me, Mary? You didn't wait for them."

"They'd never have come to me. Besides, if you had them you'd send a limo when I wished to go shopping, and a maid to look after my progeny. And I can do without things better than you could."

"That sounds regretful, Mary. Remember when you said Lucy would do the very same things over again?"

"I say it still, Chickie. Of course, once in a while I'd like to have a purse full of money—I'd like two or three hats. I'd love to go to all the good shows, but I wouldn't give up what I've got if I could stand on top of all the dollars in the world."

"It's worth as much as that—honestly, is it, Mary?"

"It's inevitable—and that's about all there's to it—at least for me. A girl that's cold and calculating can arrange her life to suit her mind, but I had to let mine run along after my heart. It's the richest way, but the hardest, perhaps."

"Well, suppose Edward couldn't have married you for years and years?" She began to talk rapidly, with a little catch in her voice. "What do you think you would have done, then? Put your heart in cold storage, or take some one else?"

Mary put down the vegetable knife and wheeled about, facing Chickie, staring at her for a long moment. "Don't you tell me, Chickie, that after all you've shouted from the housetops, you're going to let yourself fall for the hard things like poor Lucy did! And that poor dub of a Mary! Do you mean to say you'll turn down Jake Munson?"

"Don't be alarmed, Mary, Jake isn't at my feet. He's not the marrying kind. I was only wondering about it. It seems to me that's about all a girl does, even you, Mary—is wondering about love. Awfully independent, aren't we? I was thinking about that to-day." Chickie was hurriedly running to cover—fearful that Mary would see her thoughts. "You know that new girl in the office—that Stella Wilson I told you about? She says she wouldn't give up her job for the best man on earth, and you know she just falls on the neck of any little shrimp that stops to talk to her. Thirty and beautiful and sour—poor old Stella! And all because no man got the notion to marry her. We don't amount to much, do we?"

"Alone—humph—I guess not. Women are born for love, Chickie. It's the cord that weaves them into the chain of life." Mary laughed. "Mother used to say we're a handful

of beautiful beads thrown on a bare floor. Then a little kid comes along with a darning needle and picks the beads onto a bright red string that brings out all their colors, gives them meaning . . . picks them out any old way, leaving out some of the prettiest. And all the beads want like everything to be a part of that chain. Because otherwise, what are they? Transparent, meaningless."

"I suppose the red string is love, then? The beads that get left may be the luckiest. They're free—they can roll wherever they choose."

"Yes—on a bare floor—remember that!"

The baby began to cry. Mary ran in and took him from his crib. She stood at the door, holding him on her hip as she bade good-by to Chickie. She said: "You didn't tell me the truth, Chickie. I'd like to bet that Jake has asked you to marry him and you wanted to find out if money was worth enough. Is that it?"

"He hasn't asked me, Mary—and I don't believe he has the remotest intention of it."

"Oh, yes—well, his type always does marry. And I wouldn't put too much stock in that gossip we used to hear. He looks good enough."

Chickie laughed: "Mary, you look just like your mother, standing there with the baby."

"For pity sakes, don't wish that on me!"

"You love children—you want to suffer—"

"Well—yes—little Eddie here has to have a brother and a sister or so, but I hope fate will be kind and grant me a pause for breath between times."

"Leave it to fate, Mary, old dear, and you know what'll happen—"

She walked the few blocks homeward slowly. Inevitable—that's the way Mary explained it. Nothing wildly exultant about Mary. Beads on a red string—why Mary hoped ardently that she might care for Jake.

He came to see her that night. Unexpectedly. He laughed when she opened the door. He stepped aside quickly and a sleek Belgian police dog loped into the narrow hallway.

"Like him?"

She was speechless—wide-eyed with delight. A week previous, as they drove through the park early one evening, she happened to see a girl walking with one. She said she

wished it was hers. She'd feel like a princess out walking with a noble canine like that.

"Feel like a princess? Come here, Wildie, and make a bow to your mistress."

"Is he mine for keeps? Do you mean to let me have him all the time?" She kneeled on the floor, taking the beautiful, long head in her hands. And suddenly, with a joyous laugh, she stooped down and kissed the dog's head. He licked her face.

Jake touched her shoulder, his red lips drawn together. He said quietly: "Chickie—well!" Then he laughed, but he gripped both her hands and stared at her. "Don't you do that again! Don't do it while I'm around!"

She couldn't sleep that night because of her excitement. She got up several times and went into the kitchen and put her arms around Wildie's neck and laughed. Sunday she took him for a walk. Barry Dunne went with her.

When he saw the dog he said suddenly: "Yours? Jake gave it to you? Say, do you realize that a dog like that might cost as much as an automobile?"

She stood stock still and stared. "No!"

"They do—some of them. Humph—What's a thousand to Jake if he wants to toss a little gift to a girl?"

"You think I shouldn't take it? I can't give it back now—I love it—"

"Why should you give it back? No—we'll keep it! Nice company for us! Come here, Wildie—take a good look at your dad—new one—"

The end of the week Jake said to her suddenly: "Well, it's all arranged, Chickie. We'll have the finest kind of weather."

"What do you mean?"

"The yachting trip, of course. Haven't forgotten, have you? Down to Santa Barbara. There'll be ten of us—jolliest kind of a crowd."

"Why, I couldn't go. I can't, really."

"Yes, you can! You're the mainsail, my dear. There'll be no trip without you. So—you're coming."

CHAPTER XXVII

HER ANSWER

SHE felt herself lifted to some glittering peak—the world outflung in brilliance before her. She saw herself stepping gracefully on the yacht, beautiful and careless, in some stunning sport clothes. She let her thoughts drift delightedly; closed her eyes, saying sharply, "I'm going! A chance like that! Any time!"

She went through her closet, counting over the dresses that might do. She would have to buy two or three outfits—white pumps, a sweater—

At breakfast the next morning she dallied over her coffee. Finally she said: "Mr. Munson is taking a party on his yacht to Santa Barbara. He wants me to go."

Jennie's face rosy, her eyes beamed proudly as though they said: "There—what did I tell you? I declare!" She glanced over to Jonathan. He doubled up his chin, looking fixedly at Chickie. "Who else is going, Chickie? Do you know them?"

"Yes, of course—ten, altogether. Three married couples; so you see, cutie love, lots of chaperons."

"You want to go, Chickie?"

"Oh, Jonathan! Well, now, wouldn't you if you were me? Out on the water. Oh, I'd love it—I'd just love it!"

"I suppose so. Well—" He shook his head heavily. "You think about it, Chickie. I suppose it's all right or he wouldn't ask you."

A limpness passed softly into her veins. Abruptly she knew she was counting on their opposition—indeed, half hoped for it. Their consent threw her back on her own judgment that was one moment clear and relentless; the next, beaten down by her hot leaping desires.

A trip like that—out on the ocean—riding with the wind. Miss that? Because people might talk? Because Janina would give her a sneering look? She should worry!

But at noon she hurried off alone to lunch. She went to the restaurant where she hoped to meet Barry Dunne. He was already there—waiting at the table where they often sat. But

he didn't wink or give her a gleeful look or wax blithely talkative.

He regarded her with veiled accusation in his young, ardent face. "So we're going on a little yachting trip, Chickie?"

"Oh, Barry, you're coming!" Unconcealed joy made her eyes shine.

"I? Want me along, Chickie?"

"Why, I'd say that was mighty joyous—"

"Well—so you ARE going? It's all settled, then." He snapped his jaws sharply.

A shiver of dismay made her cold, made her heart bound. She answered with a touch of fire: "What do you mean? Why are you angry?"

"Why, I'm not—not at all. I'm a trifle surprised, that's all. It's your own business, of course."

"But you're going? When did Jake ask you?"

"He—didn't—ask me!" Biting the words out roughly.

"How do you know about it, then?" She spoke quietly, feeling his anger like a needle of flame going into her mind.

"Oh—so you didn't intend to mention it! You weren't going to tell me about it? Going to slip off quiet like."

She clasped her hands, looking down at them trembling. She could feel the blood leaving her face, sinking from her heart. She had never seen him furious like this, before. Her voice trailed: "Why are you saying such things, Barry?"

"Because I'm a damn fool! That's why!" He saw then her still, white hands; the quivering of her sweet, pointed chin. A flush stole through him, drew him so that he wished to stand up and cover her with his arms. He said softly, "Chickie—I just can't understand it. I don't know what to make of you. When Bob Larkin told me you were going—that Jake was taking you along, I could have knocked him down."

"Wouldn't you go, Barry? I think it's a glorious chance."

He stared at her moodily: "Have you ever been on a long yachting trip like this?"

"No—I haven't. Oh, I don't believe what you're thinking at all. There are to be three couples, and do you suppose for a moment that Jake would ask me to go if it wasn't perfectly all right?"

"I'm not saying anything. There'll be plenty of liquor along. You know that. There'll be a gay time, all right. Sure I'd go if he asked me! I wouldn't miss it. But you don't seem

to want some things. You wouldn't even stay one night on that party. You ran away."

"I didn't know we were to stay. I had to get home then. This is different."

His eyes boring into hers told a thousand things—accused her, pleaded with her. Finally he said: "Do you think some things are any different because you know of them beforehand?"

She got up from the table quickly, a wild stinging in her eyes. He followed. Not heeding, she dashed along California Street until they were both rushing breathless up the hill. He took her arm: "Listen, Chickie, I wish I hadn't said anything. As long as you seem to know."

"Oh, I don't know how you could do it—you hurt me to death. How could you say it?"

He shot a quick, puzzled glance over her face. "Well, I'm beat! That's all. It's late; I suppose you want to go back?" He took out a cigarette, lit it, pulled at it long, absently.

She didn't move. She stood on the grass, staring at the church across the street—the clock with its gold hands creeping up to one. She was afraid to speak because of the utter misery in her heart. All the beauty gone now—all the high, careless joy.

An image of Jake's handsome face with its black eyes and red, flashing smile came before her—Jake standing in the hall, laughing like a boy when he brought the dog to her.

She said with sudden warmth: "I don't believe Jake Munson ever dreamed such things as you hint! He couldn't. He's too big—too kind—"

A faint scorn touched his lips. "You have it your own way, Chickie. I haven't said anything about Jake, so far as I know."

"It's worse than if you did, and not half as honest."

"Oh, so? Well, I'm sorry." He didn't look at her. The young mouth she liked so well because it was full and sweet and very gay shut fiercely. "Perhaps you know your own business, Chickie, but I'm not sure whether you do or not. If you want to go on a trip like this and take all the gayety that comes, why, that's all right! That's fine. Only you've never acted that way. . . ."

Hot tears shot into her eyes. She said, bitterly: "What's the use of living if things are like this. . . ."

He looked at her intently. Seeing her all drooping and white like a sad, beautiful flower, his senses quickened. He took her hands eagerly: "Listen, Chickie—why so miserable? Lots of things in the world besides a trip on a yacht."

"Well, I wanted to go. I just wanted it like anything. Oh, I think it's too frightful to be always looking for hideous things!"

He could scarcely keep the buoyant note from his voice: "You aren't going then?"

Her lids kept blinking. She said bleakly: "It's one o'clock. I'll be late. I wish I didn't have to go back to work."

When they reached her building he said insistently: "Please tell me, Chickie. You aren't going?"

"Oh, I don't know what to do! No matter what you say—I don't believe such things. I don't!"

As she came into the office, Janina's eyes met hers with a soft, knowing smile. Later she said: "Well—rather gorgeous, isn't it? Oh, don't look so startled. Ida was telling me. Have you arranged to get the time off?"

"I haven't arranged anything!"

"Well, you better, my dear! Better have it all fixed up! There won't be any last boat home to papa this trip!"

Chickie answered, flushing, but with a sublime effort to be superficial: "What trip is this you speak of, ole thing?"

"The trip that hasn't any comeback, lil' violet! I shan't be pitying you much longer!"

Chickie managed a look of pitying disdain, walked off quickly, sick with agitation. Once during the afternoon she looked across the alley. Barry Dunne came swiftly from the shadow. He leaned with both hands on the window-sill. His lips drew together. To her astonishment, a thrill, like a soft breeze, swept through her thoughts.

But at five o'clock she went through the building and out a side door. She didn't want to meet him. She didn't want to meet Jake.

In the kitchen, Jennie was sewing—pale pink crêpe and lace. She was making a camisole.

"For me, sweet Jennie?"

"Who else? I might as well. I have the goods. You'll need plenty on such a grand trip as this."

She said abruptly, startling herself: "I'm not going! It's

all off. Well, you see—I can't get off! We're terribly busy. Oh, I don't care! There's lots of time."

She took off her hat, hurrying from the room.

She spent the whole evening writing a letter to Jake Munson. When she finished it was but a stiff, timid, pathetic thing—quite different from her blithe chatter.

"Dear Jake—You are so kind to want to take me on this glorious trip and I really would just love to go. But seein' as things is as is, I can't. Mother isn't very well. She is terribly afraid of the water and would be worried all the time. Please don't think me ungrateful, but it's just impossible for me to go.
"CHICKIE."

She didn't even notice the resentful tear that blurred the last line. She folded the sheet hastily, thinking dully: "Well, that's ended! I wonder what I've done."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE CHOICE

"CHICKIE, are you going to throw me down like this?"

"I never took you up, so I don't see how I'm throwing you down."

"You let me think you were coming."

"No—I didn't. You wanted to think that. I'm sorry. I don't see what I can do. It's just as I wrote you." She kept her face averted, her cheeks burning. Jake looked at her a long while in silence.

He said quietly: "You've let me in for a ghastly two weeks of it, Chickie. I can't call it off now. I've asked everybody—arranged it all. I've got to go." He slumped down in the automobile, letting his arm rest behind her.

They were parked among the trees at Stow Lake. The water was a black, gleaming mirror—a still, mysterious chalice that caught the gay little stars, the leaves and the yellow moon, swaying them in a deep, rhythmic hush.

"We would have had nights like this, Chickie—nights so beautiful you'd begin to hear that grand old wind you're waiting for. Are you going to let it pass? Going to send me off alone, Chickie?"

"Perhaps you think it's easy for me to refuse pleasures like this, Mr. Munson?"

"Jake—if you please—I thank you for putting it in the note. Do you mean you want to go? You'd really like the fun of it?"

"Well—you ask yourself that—Jake, then. I've never had a chance like this before. Of course, I wanted to go."

"Then why, Chickie? Why? You want these things. I want to give them to you."

"No—I can't. I explained."

"Yes—you explained, Jennie, indeed! Do you think I'm a boy, Chickie, dear, to swallow your pretty Jennie stuff? I'd like to know what happened to set you thinking. And you come back and throw me down."

She gave no answer. His hand covered hers. "Will you say 'Yes' now and come, Chickie?"

She shook her head, watched the still trees, mirrored in the lake. His eyes, speculative, intent, dwelt on the chaste sweetness of her profile.

"Chickie, I won't see you for two weeks, maybe much longer. You're sending me away. Kiss me before I go?"

She drew a long, hard breath, trembling.

"Will that hurt you? Oh, it won't. Please." His arm drew tight about her shoulder. "Chickie, dear—give me just one. I've waited for this—months—a year. Give me something for company—two lonely weeks—you can do that little thing—"

She raised her face. He caught her in his arms, quick, exultant—pressed his lips with a long, slow tenderness on hers.

He let her go; sat with his hands on the wheel, his face white and quiet as a piece of chalk. She felt spent, as though his lips closed on her heart, draining it of life.

Presently the red came back to his mouth. He pressed his palm against both her hands. "I don't know what it is you're doing to me, Helena Bryce. But it was never done before."

She felt shaken in every nerve; she felt white and still.

The day the yacht sailed she had a sad, mournful feeling of aloneness. Janina watched her all morning, dropping her eyes almost abashed when Chickie met them. At lunch she said with a touch of eager humility: "What a shock to see you walk into the office this day of days. I can't survive it. Chickie, did anything I said keep you from going?"

"Oh, flatter yourself, ole thing! You took an awful lot for granted."

"Be a sport, Chickie—answer me this: Did you tell Jake I frightened you into staying away?"

Chickie gave a derisive laugh: saw the passionate eagerness like a visible pain on Janina's face. "No, I didn't mention your name, Janina, dear. And nothing you said made a particle of difference."

In her relief Janina sat back with a sigh. Her hard, brilliant eyes appraised Chickie, musing: "What you're saving, girl, may be worth a lot. I have my doubts. What you lose in keeping it is more than worth its price."

Chickie said coldly, "Why are you so crude, Janina? Do you just like to say things to shock?"

"I'm not crude, Chickie—I'm truthful. I've only taken off

some of the moldy papers they've wrapped about Life and what I've found inside is a whole lot cleaner and sweeter than the contemptible hypocrisy that hides it! Take that or leave it!"

"If every one did that, Janina—things would be rather terrible. . . ."

"Yes—they handed that bunk to our grandmothers! Made them run along the chalk line. But we're on the broad road now. Is it going to hurt us any more than it hurt men?"

"All girls don't believe as you do by a long shot!"

Janina smiled. "Thirty per cent. of the marriageable females, my dear, are without mates. Are they living in monasteries? They are not! Are they going to perdition sixty miles an hour? I'd like to bet they aren't! All in the course of evolution, my dear. Takes a little while after you discover you have feet before you learn to walk easily. Same with us. Minds leap into the future, instincts rooted in the past. Have to fight for harmony. We'll get there—some of us—"

She broke off abruptly, nudged Chickie: "Here comes Bess Abbot—something doing?"

A thin, graceful girl with a languid air, dreamy black eyes and hair bobbed, caught Janina's glance. She sauntered over delicately, dropped into a chair, letting a gold vanity and a cigarette case clatter on the table. "Hello, Janka, love," she said with a long breath. "Why is life so tiresome? Cheer me up. I've been looking for you."

"Then meet Chickie. She's the most refreshing thing I know. Spring violet!"

"Oh, is this Miss Bryce?" Bess Abbot gave a wan smile, tapped her lips with a very pale, transparent hand. "Scuse, my dears: I only got two or three hours' sleep this morning. Can I smoke here?" She opened her case, offered it to them. "Rescue me, Janka, if they try to put me out. I'm weary."

She wore an immense solitaire on her left hand. Its setting was massed with small diamonds. "Like it? Well, I decided to take it after all. Harry's such an old pest, Janka."

Janina laughed. "So you're engaged, are you, Bess?"

"So it seems. All is monotony. By way of celebration we'll have a house party, Friday to Sunday. You won't fail me, Janka?" She turned lazily to Chickie: "Why don't you come along, Miss Bryce? We do have some riotous times."

Janina interposed, "Chickie's just hopped off a fryingpan; she may not choose to jump into the fire."

"Don't mind her, Miss Bryce. I don't give that kind of party. Very nice—mother's along. You come and bring your steady."

She finished another cigarette, took out a lip stick and brightened her lips to a vivid scarlet. It made her look more hopelessly young and tired than before.

"So—I'm on my sad way again. Remember, Miss Bryce, I'll expect you."

"Chickie's steady is out of town, Bess."

"Ah, woe! Then bring your intermittent!"

Chickie was delighted with the interview. So otherwise—that bored, duchess manner.

"That's Bess—you know her. Only has about a million in her own name. Her mother and mine were chums in their wild days. The old girl stepped high. I mean the original Bess. They've a gorgeous place down in Santa Clara. Will you bring Red?"

"I don't know. She only asked me out of politeness."

"Any time sweet Bess is polite! She'd as lief have sat here and blown smoke in your face if she took the notion. So get that out of your head. I'm glad. Now I don't feel so guilty about spoiling the yachting trip for you."

Chickie felt a tingle of gladness darting all through her nerves. She glanced over at Barry Dunne's window. She thought nervously: "He didn't ask me out over Sunday. I wonder if he made other plans."

He met her as he came from work—a high, jaunty note in his voice. "You didn't weaken? Look out, now—don't give me the disdainful sneer. I prayed for you, you dear, sweet frail. I worried for you. And you're safe!"

"I suppose, then, I'm to thank you."

"Second time, girl, I've rescued you from the jaws of God knows what!"

"Does that make you any relation to me?"

"It certainly does."

Chickie burst out laughing—all at once carried along in a swinging lightness. "Does it make you my 'steady'?"

"Oh, I was that already. Steady as old Gibraltar."

"Then you're invited on a party with me. I was told to

come and bring my 'steady.' If that happens to be you—why come—sir!"

He said, boyishly: "Great," and, with a wink, "I'll make you forget what you missed!"

"I'm not so sure about that, Mr. Red. I wanted it an awful lot."

"Chickie—please tell me this: Did you stay away because I asked you to? Because I wanted you to?"

"La, la, for you, Redhead! You'd like to know!"

She felt herself suddenly alight, as though laughter broke in sparkling waves through all her veins.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE HOUSE PARTY

"ARE we on the right road, Barry? I'd hate to get lost—miss all the fun."

"Any road is a right enough road when me and me steady is on it and going good together." He jabbed his elbow lightly against her arm. "Nice that the fair one is in such a sweet humor?"

"I always am."

"Except Tuesday of last week, one o'clock, precisely."

"I had enough cause for sorrow! Now, after all my pangs, Janina says I've but jumped from the frying pan into the fire."

"Thank heaven I'm the fire in this case. Let any one who will be the frying pan."

"Oh, you! She meant we are to have a most risqué time, isn't that riotous? Bess Abbot is awfully fascinating. She has two younger sisters—twins. Janina says they're just thrilling. Only sixteen and one of them's engaged already. Bess doesn't seem to take marriage very seriously. She said the man she's to wed is just an awful pest. But they'll take a flier at it kind of impudent like."

"You got sore the other Sunday when I said marriages to-day didn't amount to much."

"With me it would amount to everything. I couldn't look at a thing like love breezily as though it were just a hat I was to wear for half a season and then toss aside."

"How do you look at love?" He glanced at her suddenly, his cheeks flushing. "Do you know?"

After a moment she laughed nervously: "Yes—beautiful like a sunset and lasting always. Oh, sometimes I think of love as a bright cloud sailing over mountain tops and two people—always the same, always together, sitting on it—riding and riding—always."

"But nothing lasts. We grow old. We change. It may be the most beautiful thing in the world to-day. It may be gone completely to-morrow. We ought to live in the present."

"Do you really think that? Who'd want your kind of love, then?"

"You spurn it, Chickie? Then I guess I'll have to climb up to your eternal cloud. Move over a bit, will ye?" He bent his head with a swift nod and before she was aware, kissed her lightly.

"You shouldn't do that, Barry."

"Why, Chickie? And you so sweet? Who could help it—let me see—Chickie, do you know how pretty you are?"

She glanced uneasily down the long, white road. Just then a big, open car, alive and blooming with color, with laughing faces, dashed toward them, coming to an abrupt halt across their path. The girl at the wheel thrust out a radiant brown head, bobbed, curled and now tossing in the breeze:

"Beg pardon. Do you happen to be Miss Bryce and Mr. Dunne? Well—then we're looking for you. Bess sent us down to put you on the right road. Follow us and wear diamonds!"

She switched the car recklessly. The five other girls, none of them past seventeen, laughed uproariously. The sound rippled like a gay banner flung open.

"They must be twins!" Chickie whispered in excitement.

"What! The whole wagon load of them!"

"Idiot! The two in front. They dash all over the country in that big car. It's their very own!"

"Ah—the curse of money descends upon us. Looks as though we're to have a merry time!"

The big car swerved down a road planted with poplars. The road continued for a quarter of a mile, winding upward over a great rolling slope, cool and dark with eucalyptus and oaks. It opened suddenly into a vast green bowl—an immense garden, with a magnificent stone house rising from a huge bulwark.

"You've arrived!" The bright, pert girl climbed down from the car. She was followed by another who was her image except that the other girl had a peeved, sophisticated attitude and smoked a cigarette with a look of incredible disgust.

"I'm Nance, good people! Allow me to present my dear twin, Marge. She's melancholy to-day—but 'twill pass!"

Marge, each eyelash standing forth, black and separate, her small, pretty mouth a dark crimson, flung a flaming orange scarf. She greeted Chickie and Barry with an indifferent nod.

Nance gave her a little shove, put her arm in Chickie's, saying with great chumminess: "Well—Bess told us about you

both. Bess was so sorry she couldn't meet you, but a whole raft of people she didn't expect blew in on her. We're crowded to the room. Janka's here. She just got in. Don't you love Janka? She's so wicked! Marge is imitating her to-day. Doesn't she do it well?"

Marge cast her a look of vast, scornful pity: "Janka is as foolish as the rest of the world. I'm bored to extinction."

Barry Dunne pinched Chickie's arm. He said somberly: "Oh, I say, Marge, how long have you been a dweller on this tiresome little dot we call the earth?"

"Miss Abbot, if you please, Mr. Dunne!"

Nance tittered in delight. "Isn't she immense! But I'll tell you, Red—that's your name, isn't it?—she's been here two minutes longer than I—to be exact, sixteen years, one month and three days."

Marge reared her chin, walked off, too moody for anger. Nance called after her: "Honey, dear—now, don't take the car—" She turned back to her guests: "Well, what do you think of our harem site?"

"Is that what it is?"

"You wait and see! Janka christened it. She says we have it all over the Turks. Look—down there by the trees is the pool. Marge and I go swimming every morning." She added in Chickie's ear: "We swim *à la naturelle*! Oh, wonderful! Want to come with us to-morrow?"

They passed up the terrace into a cool, broad hall with rugs and tall, high-back chairs. It opened on a court of flowers.

"Now, you go that way, Mr. Dunne. We put the fellows over there. Your door is second to the right. We fair ones are here. We'll see you anon."

He wasn't out of earshot when she said exuberantly to Chickie: "I like your sweetie! Isn't he gay! Marge is furious! Now, here."

A big room with French doors opened on a porch covered with vines. Red and white roses, the second bloom of the year, climbed in fragrant ladders to the roof. Nance, the irrepressible, squeezed Chickie's arm: "This is the Romeo and Juliet balcony." She glanced downward with a wink of impudent delight: "Easy enough crawling up or down. Isn't it!"

Chickie felt herself in a dream of soft beauty—all her senses quivered to the exquisite excitement. She almost said aloud: "Well—how in heaven's name did you land here, Helena Bryce!"

As they returned to the room a girl was standing at the bureau, carefully placing a net over bright hair, beautifully smooth and close to her head. She was tall—a quiet sweetness in her manner—a girl several years older than Chickie.

When Nance saw her she dashed over and threw her arms about her neck: "Ila—honey angel! I didn't even know you were here!"

The girl laughed: "Nancy! Now don't tell me you're in on the party."

"I like that!" She tossed the bobbed head with a brazen shrug: "Ila, ole sweetie, what this baby doesn't know! Well, I'll leave you two honeys a moment if you don't mind."

Ila turned with a quiet little twist of a smile: "Am I in my second childhood, I wonder?"

Chickie, thrilled to her finger tips, answered: "Isn't she the cutest thing?"

"Well, I can't get over it. I've been away three years, and to see the twins on the verge of old age and Marge ready to get married. Swift lives we lead these days!"

Chickie combed out her hair. She stood at the bureau next to this Ila Moore, found the girl's deep, quiet eyes fixed on her with quizzical interest. "Turn your head that way, again, Miss Bryce. Now look."

Chickie was instantly struck by a resemblance between her face and Ila's. The older girl's was serene; Chickie's vivid and now all dashed with excited color. Chickie's hair was a purer gold and her eyes more heavily shadowed.

Ila said: "We look rather alike—only you're far prettier."

"No—you have a deeper look of beauty. That's not in me."

"I'm older. I'm very old. At least I feel so with all these infants of fifteen and sixteen smoking and flirting and marrying. I feel more like fifty than twenty-five." She gave Chickie a sweet, candid look: "I like you, Miss Bryce."

They both started as some one knocked at the door. It was Barry calling: "Open it, Chickie! Ready? We'll have time for a walk."

He paused abruptly, giving Ila Moore a long, surprised glance of recognition. He came over and leaned on the bureau:

"Ila! Of all things! I didn't expect to see you here!"

She put out her hand quietly, but her calm face was suddenly crimson. "Barry—how very strange!"

CHAPTER XXX

REVELATION

CHICKIE saw that bright flush on Ila Moore's quiet face. She felt all through her a vague quiver of alarm that sharpened like a little dagger going through her heart. She hadn't the courage to raise her eyes to Barry Dunne's face. She heard him say: "See you later, Ila"; heard herself adding, "I'm so glad we're to have the room together," but she was aware only of that hot, pointed thing which made even her breath giddy.

She said in a little strained voice as they walked through the garden: "Isn't she sweet? Do you think we look very much alike?"

They were in a narrow, secluded path beyond the pool where a weeping willow trailed its long, delicate vines in a green shower across their way. The fading yellow light moved through the lacy branches like a pale spirit reluctant to part.

"Look alike? Who do you mean?"

"Why, that Ila Moore and I."

"She looks like you!" He turned her around, looking down at her face and laughing. "Well—let me see. Open your pretty eyes."

His hands on her shoulders trembled, crossed down about her. A flush crept to his forehead. She moved toward him. She said with a little gulp, "Oh, Barry—don't—" but a thing within her shook out a thousand glad, demanding notes. When his lips touched hers she clasped her hands against him, motionless in the sweet tide of joy. They stared affrighted into each other's eyes.

He took her arm and ran her down the path: "Now—we've got to hurry."

The terrace about the house was now a bright, moving field of color. Girls in vivid sport clothes, men and boys in white flannels, sauntered about laughing. Snatches of song rose through the soft twilight and dropped like silver chimes.

Every now and then an automobile dashed up the driveway. Youths rollicked out, shouting gayly: "Here we are!" "Dinner ready?" "On with the dance!"

Chickie sped through the hall, stood quiet outside her door, hearing within Janina's clear, incisive voice and the graceful languor of Bess answering. She paused. She clenched her hand on the knob, shaking, afraid lest they should see the mad fluttering of her pulse, the blood leaping with such pain, such tumult to her face. She thought, trembling, "What shall I do? Oh, what am I to do now?"

Bess, very fragile and dark of eye, in a simple dress of white crêpe, enlivened by a vivid string of ruby amber beads that reached half way to her knees, was just crossing the room.

"Don't think me an awful barbarian, Miss Bryce. Tell her I'm a sweet soul, Janka, love. But every one from far and near took a notion to swoop down on us this week. I hope there's food enough for all the wolves. Let's to the table!"

"Don't worry about the garbage, Bess, my dear, But pity us if the well runs dry." There were two small glasses filled with a bright red cordial. Janina brought one to Chickie, and slipping her arm in hers, whispered with an admiring sigh: "Enjoying every little thing? You look excited. You look rapturous. You'll drive the poor boy mad. Ah—such is life!"

Chickie ran over to the bureau, dashed powder on her nose, on the bright stain of her cheeks. She pretended to wash her hands, letting the cold water run through her fingers. She wished that something chill like that would run through her veins.

Dinner was a most informal affair—quick, hilarious—half of the guests standing—half of them sitting—shouts across the table; laughter. Bess and Nance divided the honors as hostess.

Mrs. Abbot, Janina whispered, was in the city. In the company of her third husband she divided her time between her town house and this magnificent country domain. But she made it a point never to attend the week-end expressions of her children. She filled her life within her own demands. The three girls did likewise.

They had the run of the place. They crowded it each week-end with hectic throngs of girls and very young men. They dashed about the country in automobiles. They danced until the musicians rebelled.

Strains of an orchestra came now in a golden vibrance

through the open doors. Couples rose automatically from the table, drifted like figures in a slow dream into the immense room adjoining.

Chickie sat next to Barry Dunne. But she didn't look at him. She was afraid and tremulous because of the disturbing sweetness vibrant like a living thing between them.

At her right was Janina's escort—the yellow-haired boy Chickie had met coming down the steps of the studio. He was drinking in with rapt ardor the murmurs of Janina's voice. They were oblivious of others.

Each couple was a unit. No one bothered to make the conversation general; no one bothered with any introductions. At the very end of the table Ila Moore, serene, beautiful in a dress of pale green, smiled at Chickie. Barry saw it and waved his hand.

"Let's dance," he said to Chickie.

There was a lilt about him when he moved—a free, happy, rhythm. They did a kind of pattering fox trot. His arm drew her close: "Sad? Why for, sweet one? Look up, Chickie—come on, now—give your steady a smile!"

She forced her eyes upward, saw his cheeks redden, but he kept looking at her, pursed his lips, taunting.

"Don't do that, Barry."

"Won't I! Here's another."

She felt little sparkling waves, intoxicating and sweet, breaking her feet. She was afraid of them; she was drawn, expectant and eager. She said, hesitant: "You never answered my question, Barry."

"Which one?"

"Do you think I and that lovely Ila Moore look alike?"

"I should say not! Any more than the yolk of an egg looks like the sun."

"Is she the sun?"

"Not if she shines in my heaven! Oh, Ila's a good kid. I met her the Summer I finished college. They have a place at Tahoe. She's quite brilliant in a way—wants to write or sing or something. In my callow youth I thought that very magnificent."

"She's different from the other girls, then, isn't she?"

"Sure she is! Don't know what she's doing here. Notice the quiet chap she was with. That's her fate. She'll marry

some ambitious lad of forty and push him to the top of the heap. Peace to her!"

At that Chickie murmured with sudden delight: "Oh, I think her most enchanting."

A troupe of the younger girls came sauntering and laughing into the room—radiant and pretty—all of them like a bright sea of moving poppies. They drifted past, blowing the smoke behind them, very superior, wrapped in disdain. They made their way to the table in the corner where a huge bowl of punch was now established.

"The airs of these kids," Barry grinned. "Wonder where they'll be at twenty? Bored to extinction at sixteen years and two months."

Like an answer came a gay shout. Nance, the younger twin, in a crimson smock, knee breeches and sandals, her bobbed, curled hair standing out like a nimbus, breezed down the long room. She wagged her shoulders impishly. A narrow-chested young man with a drooping mouth, large, heavy-lidded eyes followed her, shrugging cynically.

When she spied Chickie, she caught his hand and ran over, making a gay little bow. "How do you like me? Bizarre, am I not! Oh, I adore the eccentric. Don't you? Otherwise I'd be going in a perpetual trance like Bess and Marge.

"Oh, pardon, my dear! Let me present Mr. Bobby Elders." She whispered excitedly to Chickie. "What do you think of my sheik? Isn't he stunning?"

Then aloud, like a gracious embrace: "Well, we were looking all over for you and Red just before dinner. I had a nice little goblet for you! Oh—not that I meant to be inquisitive a-tall!—not in a harem, you know! But where were you, so that we can go and get lost? Hear about Marge? She's gone! Taken the car and her sweetie and vanished! Since before dinner."

She shrugged with a sigh, meant to be wildly insinuating: "What these engaged girls will do! I should worry if Mrs. Abbot doesn't! What's a twin between mother and daughter?"

"So long—honey, dear. I may bring you something nice a little later on." She flung back wickedly over her shoulder, "That is, if I don't join the missing legions!"

Chickie glanced after her wistfully: "I wasn't as smart as

that at sixteen, though Mary and I thought we knew an awful lot."

"You are not as smart as that now."

"Why do you say that?"

"You aren't. That's what makes you so charming. Blush now—"

She glanced up at him, pleading. He bent down quietly and whispered: "Chickie, I love you."

CHAPTER XXXI

LOVE

FLAME touched her. She felt his eyes as piercing lights going down into her heart, opening it with joy. She stood and let their radiance sweep her, her senses singing as the music closed about them—as they swayed in the dance.

Oh, she wanted to see that light again—drink its glad warmth. She stole a flushed glance upward at his face. It was turned to hers. He said with his lips straightened: "Chickie!" And nearer, at her ears, "I love you."

"Oh, Barry—"

He drew her so close his heart beat loud against her own. They danced. They were alone, oblivious of the couples drifting about them; the low hum of laughter, the procession shouting with merriment that wound incessantly to and from the punch bowl.

When the music ceased she felt as one coming with pain from a dream of overpowering sweetness, fighting against awakening.

With a shock she heard Janina at her shoulder: "Come now, Chickie, you and Red have been at this long enough."

Her face turned cruelly scarlet: "Oh, have we? Why—every one is dancing."

Janina's laugh rippled boisterously: "Guilty conscience, is it? Didn't mean to surprise that. Take a stroll, Chaffee, the dear Hebe carries the jug of Bacchus in his car."

The blond youth with his petulant mouth and dark, storming eyes flushed with pleasure. "Well, I don't know as it's that good, Janina—but fair enough at that."

The lights from the house threw a soft, yellow glow over the terrace and into the dark bowl that was the garden. In this pale, shimmering reflection couples sauntered—dim, elusive, poetic—in and out among the trees. Other couples, garish and noisy, whisked gayly from the ballroom to the automobiles parked everywhere among the shrubs.

Chaffee Arnold's sedan was hidden among poplar trees on a sharp twist of an old road. He took a silver flask from a pocket near the driver's seat, passed it around with a pleased, eager

look at Janina. "I had a lot of trouble getting this. It's the old man's finest stuff. Is it all right?"

Janina laughed. "All right? It is. Not all gone, I trust?"

He shook the bottle. "Enough for a round or two more."

Janina answered, letting her head rest on his shoulder: "Chaffee, dear, you're a bright young thief. I have hopes for you! Make yourselves comfortable, you in the rear. We shan't see you!"

Chickie sat with her hands clasped. When she saw Chaffee's fair head bend to Janina's face she grew hot with embarrassment. Suddenly the tears rushed to her eyes. When Barry slipped his arm to her shoulder she sat upright, saying with a little start, "Oh, don't you think we should be going back? They'll think we're frightfully impolite."

From the depths of a delicious languor Janina answered, "Who'll think that, Chickie? Who'll worry about us?"

"Why, Bess, of course—and every one. I haven't even been introduced to a soul yet!"

A quiet laugh: "Listen to the baby! What's your trouble, Chickie? Aren't you and Red satisfied with each other? Too bad! Too late to swap now. What do you think, ole dear—they're waiting for us to come in and play 'Ring Around Rosie' or musical chairs?"

Barry touched her hands. "Want to go, Chickie?"

She nodded.

He said aloud: "Ah—but that's winsome music, Janina. Come in and I'll dance with you."

"You'll have to promise more than that, Red, my dear. Be on your way if you like. Chaffee and I'll keep the back seat warm for you."

The night touched about them gently—humming. She turned her hand eagerly in his. He said: "Are you cold? Suppose we take a walk?"

She felt herself blending with the shadows, with the strains of distant music floating on the low October breeze. They went slowly down the terrace and on. They passed an arbor twined all about with roses, black in the moonlight.

He said, "Chickie, please—oh, I have to know—tell me. Well, let's sit here a while."

He had just parted the heavy vines; he had almost stumbled against the figures sitting on the bench when a laugh darted at them—high, shrill: "Ha, ha! Too late! Occupied!"

Chickie sprang back, shaking. His arm stiffened against her. He dropped the vines—hot with anger.

After a long silence he said: "Listen, Chickie!"

She waited. He stood beside her and suddenly reached down and took her hand: "Don't be unhappy! Why for? Beauteous night—thee and me—the stars—look up, please."

They had wandered to the pool. The darkness closed on them like an immense black flower. They were in its heart, listening to its pulse, the high throbbing song of the cricket weaving itself incessantly into silence.

He took her hands, pressing them against him. He reached over and touched her hair. "Chickie—you tell me—please—oh, I have to know. I love you."

Laughter shivered through her.

"Listen. I'm not asking you to marry me. I can't—I can't think of it. But, anyway, just say it. Chickie, you're beautiful. I just want to know—a red head like me? Oh, you don't?"

His fingers caught her shoulders, the full, sweet mouth parted. She felt his eyes mingling with a wild joy in hers. With a little sob, her hands flew to his neck, drew his head down. She said, half crying: "Oh—oh!" and closed her eyes, waiting for his lips.

He put her hands against his face, held them there. "Chickie, you mean it. Say it again."

Tears rushed into her eyes. He kissed them. She clung to his hand. She wanted to wind her arms about him—wanted to press his face against her throat. She shut her eyes—shut the world out. She felt her spirit sinking to its knees—dropping its face with a fierce pang of joy in its hands.

She said swiftly: "Yes, I love you. Oh, Barry—yes."

"Then why are you crying? Oh, don't do that—"

"No, I'm not—oh—"

She smiled and let her head rest happily against his shoulder. They went out softly, as though a prayer trembled on the still breast of the water.

At the end of the sequestered path he stopped, facing her: "Chickie—you won't take it back to-morrow? It wasn't just the garden and the music?"

"Oh, no—no—"

"I? You love me?"

There rose within her a terrible exultance. She felt suddenly that she would like to turn and shout: "Oh, you! You!"

She was shaken—pale with emotion when she stole quietly to her room. The stream of light wavering under the door stilled her. For a long while she didn't enter.

Ila Moore, her bright hair in two long braids, was sitting up in bed—propped with pillows, reading. She closed her book: "Oh, you came in early. I thought I was the only farmer here."

"Why, it's nearly one!"

"But listen!" From the dance hall the music climbed upwards in a lonely, haunting strain. There was no sound of footsteps—except now and then a swift, soft padding across the leaves—the couples coming and going from the machines. Ila said, stretching her arms: "Did you have a good time? I looked for you and Barry, but you never can find any one here after the first hour."

"Yes—" Chickie stood at the bureau, her head lowered, cramming her mouth with hairpins. Her hands trembled and she kept dropping the comb. It seemed to her that her heart would batter her flesh in two. "Yes—isn't it independent, though. I never was in such a do-whatever-you-please place before."

"Weren't you? You and Barry have known each other a long time, haven't you?"

Chickie glanced in the mirror, caught a glimpse of the sweet, tranquil face. The lips parted—vivid with eagerness. Chickie answered absently: "Oh—somewhat!"

Ila said lightly: "Isn't he good company? I think I'll get up early. If you want to read—don't mind about the light." She stretched herself down, clasping her hands under her head.

Chickie looked for a minute into the soft loveliness of Ila's face—its eyes closed in such serene quiet. She switched out the light.

She sat on the bed, her arms wound about her knees. Her heart knocked. Presently she heard Ila breathing in the deep regularity of sleep.

She stole softly to the balcony. The breeze touched with cool, uplifting fingers on her flaming face. She leaned against the roses, crushing them. She put out her hands, sending an ardent cry through the stillness: "Oh—I love you—"

She crept back to bed and lay there a long time motionless. She turned her face against the pillow whispering, "What am I to do?"

CHAPTER XXXII

YOUTH DREAMS

AT nine o'clock the house was still wrapped in the cloistral hush of the early morning. Chickie awakened to the sun dropping a golden ray across her bed. She opened her eyes slowly, the memory of the night coming over her with a thrill. She saw herself drawing his head down. Her thought flushed warmly.

She lay there wondering: yielding herself to the exquisite little waves that rose over her. Now and then she said with a smile: "Loves me! Oh—" She sank deliciously into these memories as into a warm, sparkling pool.

Finally she jumped from bed, dressing with a buoyant swiftness, lapsing at brief intervals into the dream.

She went out and stood on the balcony. On the terrace was Barry Dunne. He had his hat off, the beautifully set head raised, his profile sharp against a clear, blue sky. Her heart tightened—so glorious he seemed.

At that moment it was incredible to her that he had spoken; still more astonishing that she had answered. Now she rejoiced in the sudden release of her emotions. As though she had been standing in a dark threshold, unwilling to move—and suddenly found herself in the full sunlight. It poured on her soft, golden, like a rush of songs.

Suddenly he saw her—came over quickly. She leaned down, laughing into his eyes. He said with his lips: "I love you." She answered, grinning: "I know. Say something else."

These two images of him flashed into her mind—remained there indelible and luminous. Afterwards, when she thought of that Sunday—she saw him always—standing there like that.

His presence gave a touch of sheer beauty to a day that would otherwise have aroused and troubled her—the girls coming to the breakfast table in the filmiest of negligees; the shocking stories tossed off gleefully; Marge, the runaway, sitting on the lap of her fiancé, sulkily allowing him to feed her; the frank absorption of the couples one in another.

Chickie expected some general concourse of the guests—an immense basket lunch—then off on some hilarious picnic. But by noon the guests had all disposed of themselves with apparent satisfaction. Some were at the tennis courts, a few of the hardier ones were swimming, others in groups of two or four had briskly ordered the cook to put up sandwiches. They went whisking away in machines.

Janina, very fresh and handsome in an orange sweater and a white and orange skirt, appeared at twelve o'clock. She was in an amiable mood. "Well, my dear, how went the night?" She dropped her arm about Chickie.

"Most sweet."

"It did. But most swift. Suppose we four wander down the stream or somewhere? Bess promised to join us, but I haven't the heart to wake the dear girl."

Chaffee Arnold, very youthful with his moody eyes and the little boy petulance of his curved mouth, said aggressively: "I thought we were going to the mountains, Janka?"

Chickie had a sudden, quick impulse of pity for him. Not more than twenty-one, Janina was twenty-five. But he worshipped her. That afternoon he lay on the ground, plucking grasses, tickling her hand, listening with devotion when she talked. Once she ran her hand over his cheek and down about his chin. He sprang to his feet and walked away. Ten or fifteen minutes later he returned, saying humbly: "Take a walk, Janka?"

She got up lazily and followed him. The trees laced about her long, slim form. Chaffee's arm swept out with a sudden violence and caught Janina to him. They saw that.

Barry said with a touch of anger: "She'll ruin that fellow's life. It's a darn shame."

"She says she tries to send him away. He won't go."

"She had never a right to let him come. He's only a kid. A girl like that can do an awful lot of harm. She should be locked up!"

"Oh, Barry! Iron-hand! But men never have cared about hurting girls."

"Some of them have. That's no reason why she should go after a boy like Chaffee. It's sordid."

For some strange reason his words and his look caught through her with a stab of gladness. She murmured: "But if they should care for each other?"

He had his head resting against her arm. He reached his hands to her shoulder, laughing: "Ah—that makes a difference!"

She let him draw her down, exulting that she no longer had any need to stiffen herself against him. His kisses closed her eyes with an awed joy. As though they were two alone on the earth—love drawing them together; love making them one with the quiet Autumn afternoon.

This sense of release, of freedom, thrilled and terrified her. It came to her poignantly that night when they were driving home. They stopped on a quiet road, just beyond Mountain View. The vast stretch of rolling hills strung out before them, dim but majestic, in a blue, translucent haze. Trees went up a distant peak like soldiers marching.

When he put his arm about her, she moved gayly to him. His voice vibrated. "I loved you from the start, Chickie. But you didn't."

She chose not to answer. She thought of a night on the boat when the touch of his hand had suddenly starred the dark with happiness.

He persisted: "Why do you love me? I don't quite get it."

She mocked: "Because you're so handsome."

"No. It must be because I'm witty."

"It's so—anyway—isn't that enough?"

And it seemed to her that it rose like a flood, sweeping the two of them together. She had no wish to resist. His lips loitered on her eyes, her cheeks, her forehead. He ran his hand over her hair. She felt herself borne onward to the full splendor of this mighty wave.

At first it awed and frightened her. She stood in her room that night, quiet, tingling from head to foot. Wildie came snooping to the door; bounded against her, his paws on her shoulder. She snuggled his head against her neck, laughed. She took his pointed nose and shook it, saying with a little gulp: "Things ain't the same as they were, Wildie, you dear, honest thing. I'm going to change your name. Because everything's changed. Every single thing. You tell that to some one. Tell that to Jake."

Monday and many days after that when she glanced across the alley, when she wooed him from the shadow of his desk, she felt that something within her flew down to him. When he pursed his lips, laughing, it was a bright silver bridge cast

from his soul to hers. She wished to live only in these thoughts.

Mary aroused her. She dropped in late one afternoon. Mary was in the living room, the baby established on a heavy comforter spread out on the floor.

A big box—the salvage department—Mary called it because each Summer and Winter the discarded hats worn by the Blake family were stripped of feathers, ornaments, bits of ribbon, linings, and these precious savings stowed away for later use.

Mary was now delving to the bottom of the treasure box seeking some dashing fancy for a felt shape she had bought. She put the hat on her head, pulling it to a rakish angle and saying with a pathetic humor to Chickie: "Madame Irene's creation! Most becoming to dollar-ninety-eight beauties. Edward is dragging me to a dinner. The manager and his wife. Mary must do the elegant act!"

She added with a shrewd glance at Chickie: "Shall you like gentle little recreation like this, Chickie?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why—behold—trying to look like Lily the lady—"

Chickie colored. "Don't get you, Mary!"

"But Jimmy does, ole thing! So it's the redhead! Well—I'd be the last person to yell: 'Stop, look and listen,' but just the same—"

"Oh, save your fears, Mary. I've years and years before me—"

"But you've turned Jake down? He doesn't come any more."

"He's away."

Chickie sauntered down the block, swinging her arms with a great show of jubilation. Heat wrapped about her neck, lit her thoughts.

For the first time, she was again looking with a momentary lucidity at herself—the path she was taking. When the realization became too piercing she found it graciously blurring—fading into a sweet, beautiful future. Five or six years—oh, a long time—miracles happen in five or six years. They might happen for them. Young, ardent, brilliant—Barry was all of that. What he wouldn't do in five or six years!

Nevertheless, she thought of Jake, and with pique. He was surely home by now. She hadn't seen him, hadn't heard from him. It tore rather sorely at her young vanity.

Janina said to her one afternoon: "How's Jake? Haven't given him the wide open door for fair, have you?"

Chickie answered, unthinking: "He's given it to me."

Blank astonishment went palely over Janina's face. "Don't tell me!" Then she smiled. "A wise boy he is with the ladies! Well, my dear, guess Jake gave you your chance. Now he'll treat you to a little absence. If you want Jake again, you'll call on him."

"Oh, la la! He'll have a long wait. I see myself doing that little thing!"

But she did.

CHAPTER XXXIII

JAKE'S RETURN

It was for Jonathan that Chickie went to Jake. She had no thought of drawing a dark thread to complicate the gay pattern of her life.

Jonathan had come to a bitter pass. Night after night for weeks he sat at the table, his head resting heavily on his hands. He shrugged impatiently when Jennie told him he was tired—he must rest.

She made the desserts he liked, patted his shoulder. He scarcely noticed. Sometimes he got up abruptly and left the table.

Jennie dabbed her wet cheeks. "Your father is getting old, Chickie. He won't last—"

"Mother—oh, don't say that! He's only working too hard."

Jennie shook her head mournfully. "No. He's losing heart. Chickie, you won't have your father always."

Chickie's lips began to tremble: "Oh, mother, why are you talking like this? Oh, it's terrible!"

Jennie brushed the crumbs from the table to her plate. She kept nodding, immense tears running into her eyes.

As Chickie went through the hall an hour later Jonathan pushed her into her room, closed the door in a hushed, guarded way. He put his finger to his lips. He said distantly: "Mr. Munson doesn't come any more."

"He's been away. Don't you remember?"

"Oh, he's away." Jonathan's tone dropped flat, colorless. "And he's not likely to come back soon?"

"Why—why, Jonathan, what makes you ask?"

He fidgeted with his mustache, lumbering like a schoolboy: "Nothing much. I wanted his advice. He didn't think much of my oil investment?" His big hands were shaking.

"Jonathan! You put more into it? After all he told you?"

He drew himself up ruggedly—giant that he was. "Hush, Chickie! I don't want Jennie to know."

He told her gauntly. His stock had been assessed first for

\$50, then for \$125. He had paid these. Now there was a third levy for \$250. In two days he must meet it or lose the \$1,375 already invested. He admitted this was the amount of his speculation.

He said, fumbling, "Mr. Munson might tell me what to do."

"He'll tell you not to pay another cent!"

"No!" It rang out grim, fighting. "They'll not do me up! I'll pay! I'll not be frozen out! Why, Chickie, they've got the oil, and they want to get us little fellows out. I'll stick!"

Gradually he admitted that he had mortgaged the cottage, he was heavily in debt, he didn't know where to turn. He had no idea where the money must come from, but pay he would.

He stood at the bureau, leaning heavily on his great fists. He had a white, broken look that caught her heart aching. She went over and pulled his head down, laying her soft cheek on his. "Jonathan, listen, darling, don't look so. Got me, anyway."

His lips were cold. He said, turning from her, "You'll ask him then, Chickie? You'll see him to-morrow?"

The next morning and at noon Chickie walked down the block where Jake had his offices. She loitered near the entrance of the building hoping to encounter him by chance. After lunch she went up through the corridors, passing his door again and again. She kept thinking of Janina's taunt, "A wise boy he is with the ladies. Now you'll run after him." Jake would think that, too.

She hurried back to work, hot with uneasiness. But in the afternoon Jonathan's harried face, the aged, desperate anxiety in his eyes, was an aching burn in her thoughts. He asked her to do this. He asked her to help him.

At a quarter of five she went into the dressing room, washed her face and hands. Her eyes were bright with excitement; they gleamed with little amber lights. Let Jake think what he would!

Very carefully she rouged her lips—put a touch of color on her cheeks. She was going to see him—now—

She had a taut, alarmed sensation, as though she were doing a crucial thing. When the girl at the typewriter desk stared at her quietly and asked her name the blood leaped into her face. She had almost said "Chickie."

Her nervousness heightened to pain as the girl announced metallically: "A Miss Bryce is here. Is Mr. Munson in?"

She was ushered immediately into a great room. She heard a soft, exultant laugh, Jake towering over her, flashing with pleasure: "Chickie! You read my thoughts, did you? Here I've been sitting for the last hour thinking of one Helena Bryce. And the dear girl comes to see me. Bless her!"

Without looking up Chickie said in a strained, protesting tone: "Well, you see I had to come."

"Bless you, you dear!"

Feeling his intent black eyes searching over her face, his hand still clasping hers, she grew tremulous. She said with an eager rush: "Well, you see, Mr. Munson—"

"Not I! Jake—say it."

"Well, you see, Jake, it's about Jonathan. That oil investment of his. He doesn't know what in the world to do. He thought you might know."

As she went stammering through Jonathan's story, tears filled her eyes. Jake patted her hand, shaking his head with a musing, kindly tolerance: "I told him not to. That's the pity—throwing good money after bad."

"Oh! Then you can't do anything?" She drew her hand away.

He caught her arms: "What do you mean, my dear? Give the man a chance. This is a big problem. We'll thrash it out over the dinner table. The Star Oil Refinery, is it? I know the crooks behind it. God bless Jonathan and his oil that he sends my girl to see me!"

"No! I can't go. I have the evening taken." She was almost in a panic. They were going to the theater—she and Barry. She had a new dress to wear. It gave her a joy to be beautiful for him.

Jake laughed: "Some one else, Chickie? So that's what you do when the cat's away? Let him wait! What his interest, my dear! And we can't leave our darling Jonathan in the ditch, can we?"

He swept her into the machine; swept her into the restaurant, so tumultuous was his eagerness. She was shaking with uncertainty, glancing about the tables with a quiver of fear. Was this right? What would Barry think? Oh, she wanted so piercingly to measure up to the look in Barry's eyes.

Jake handed her the menu. She glanced at it a long while, not wishing to raise her eyes. He touched her hand, his look so vital, so flashing with spirit it brought a hot stain to her

cheeks: "Chickie—this is great. Did you miss me? If it wasn't for Jonathan wouldn't you ever have phoned?"

"Why should I?"

"You sent me away for those miserable weeks. Didn't you want to know if I survived?"

She laughed: "Oh, I trusted you for that!"

"You took something for granted, my dear. I didn't survive. At least I'm terribly afraid that I didn't. Did you think of me at all? Were not you wondering when I got back and this and that about me?"

"Well, Mr. Munson—"

"If you say that again, I'll cut your throat."

A laugh rang gayly from her; she felt his magnetism like a sparkling warmth: "Very well, Jake! I need my beautiful throat or else how shall I guzzle all this sumptuous food. But I might tell you that I did wonder. Indeed, I thought it very poor friendship in you to dismiss me so lightly. And I just suffered making myself go to see you to-day—"

"Ah, Chickie—you don't mean that?"

"Yes—I did. And you haven't said a word about Jonathan or given me any advice."

"That's settled, my dear. I'll tip off the fellows at the head of this. I know the strings to pull. Tell Jonathan not to pay that assessment. Some one will come around to buy his stock. He's to sell—"

"Can you do that?"

"Chickie—I can do that. Now ask me to do something else."

"But that's glorious in you. Why, you don't know what it means to my father. It's all his money. Every bit of it."

"Does it give you a kick, Chickie? You're a dear—worrying over other people. Let's talk about ourselves now. I've a box at the opera. I was just thinking of phoning you when in you walk. Come to-morrow night?"

She felt the nerves throbbing even to her fingertips. She said, looking down at her clasped hands: "No. I'm sorry. I can't."

"When will you? Name the night."

"Oh, I don't know. I'm awfully busy."

He pushed the dishes out of his way, leaned toward her: "Are you punishing me, Chickie?"

"Oh, no! What for? Why, no!"

"You don't want me around at all?"

The little pointed chin moved. Jake watched it and her beautiful, lowered eyes. The soft acquiescence of her touched fires in his thoughts. He said: "Chickie—is that it? You don't want me?"

"No—that's not it."

"Have you gone and got engaged, then?"

She didn't answer.

He said with a low, passionate violence: "You're not thinking of getting married to-morrow or the day after?"

"Don't be foolish!"

"All right then, my dear. You name the night for the opera. I'll name the nights—seven a week for other things. You don't give me the out that easily." He added with a wink of malicious mirth: "Chickie, do you think I'm going to stand by and see you throw your life away like that? I'm not!"

She felt a hot, withering protest—a sense of helplessness like a mighty wave sweeping down on her.

Jake drove her home. His car was just leaving. Barry came. He sat at the wheel and stared after the limousine; stared down the block after the limousine was gone.

CHAPTER XXXIV

OUTWITTED

HE helped her into the little roadster, took out a cigarette and lit it, doing everything with a measured calm.

She stole a look at his face and grew miserable seeing the young, full-cut mouth straightened in a stony silence. She reached her hand to his arm. "You're angry, Barry? But listen—"

"No—I'm not angry."

He kept his glance hard before him. She waited with choking heart, frightened to find his mood affecting her in this piercing, desperate way. He said quietly: "If this is your idea of things, Chickie—go to it! Don't let me interfere."

"You're unjust. You're jumping to conclusions!"

"Yes? I am, then. I've jumped to the conclusion that you've been to dinner; that you enjoyed it; that you hoped to get home a little before I arrived. But Jake was in no hurry. He races you here in his limousine."

She sank down in the seat, her strength, all at once, dropping in a hot weakness.

He was aware of her—quiet, unresistant. Like this, she had an enormous power over him. The wistful sadness of her profile was before his eyes. It went in like her little warm hand and touched his spirit. He had as often a wish to draw his arm about her, to murmur lightly: "Ah, why so unhappy?" He had a wish to kiss her—make her glad.

This softening of his resentment touched first his mouth. It made his hand gentle again as he took her arm and they walked to the theater. She smiled at him gratefully, saying with a rush: "Barry—please."

"Well, how would you feel, Chickie, if you saw me running off with some one else—off on a lark?"

"It wasn't a lark. You don't know—" She told him how it happened—why she went—all that Jake promised—how Jonathan rubbed his great hands together, chuckling like a boy in his overpowering relief.

Her eyes misted, so sweet was his approval. "Not sore a bit, then. Why, what do I care for Jake? Or any one!"

"But me, Chickie? Is that on the level?"

"And you know it, Mr. Red. I'm not wise, or I should keep you guessing more—so I'm told by them that know!"

"We need advice from them that know, Chickie! Any old time!"

During the play she slipped her hand into his, moved to tears when he held it with a quick, ardent pressure.

Over the club sandwich and coffee they had afterwards he said: "But Jake will expect you to go around with him as before."

"That makes it hard. I don't know what excuse to make or what to tell him."

"You don't have to go out with every man who asks you, do you?"

"No—but, then, I was going out with him so much, and he's been pretty fine to me. Gave me Wildie. Now he does this for Jonathan—"

"Oh—so you think you should go out with him? You should pay him back?"

"Barry—don't. That's not fair. Why, it seems as though I don't do anything but dream of you—"

The blood flew into his cheeks. He grinned, his white, even teeth sparkling. "Say more words like that, sweet one."

"I could. I think oceans of them. But, just now, I think you ought to let me tell you about this. What good is it that you're a lawyer—a most brilliant young jurist, as it were—if you can't get your best friend—"

"You mean 'my steady.'"

"All right—if you can't get your steady out of a tight pinch."

"He asked you to go out with him already?"

"Of course. And I said I had the whole week taken and I was busy. But he just roared and wanted to know if I'd fallen in love or was going to be married. What could I say?"

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. We don't want to tell any one, do we?" She brought the question out shyly. A hundred times, sitting before the bureau, combing her hair, she had thought with vague sweetness: "Are we engaged? I wonder if Barry and I are promised to each other?" She couldn't even think these things

without a warm, tremulous flush gliding over her. Now her cheeks stained.

He said, "Well, whose business is it but our own?"

"I know. And, of course, it's a little easier for you. You don't have to ask other girls to go out with you. But if I keep refusing Jake and he doesn't come to the house any more Jonathan will ask questions and Jennie will want to know. You could find me a good alibi, I should think."

"Well—you put Jake off two or three times and he won't bother any more. He's like that." Barry smiled. "Jake's a Casanova in his way. What's one unwilling flower to him when the whole garden runs over with roses only too anxious to be plucked?"

He was always making allusions that she didn't understand. But he thought her clever and a wide reader, so she assumed an air of wisdom. Many an evening before coming home from work she got off at Twenty-fourth Street, sauntering into the library. She pored over the encyclopedias; asked the tall, fairish girl at the desk questions; gathered happy bits of information that she laced about her conversation with airy nonchalance. To-morrow she would find out about Casanova—maybe ask Janina or Martha Blake or the good old reliable books.

To-night she said with a knowing shrug, "Casanova was a wise old owl, wasn't he?" Then, with an aching sigh, "It's terrible to believe that Jake or men do things like that!"

"Like what?"

"You know. I don't see how they manage to look so tickled to death with life and be so swaggery if they have all those dark, awful things behind them. Do you?"

Her eyes sought his eagerly, wishing him to agree—wishing him to stand forth far apart above those other men. "Do you see that, Barry?"

"Well, that's the way a blessed damozel looks at things."

"You, too, don't you?"

He hunched his shoulders, grinning, his forehead redder than his hair. "Oh, sure! Ever since the fair one came upon the scene, anyway."

"Meaning me?"

"Meaning you."

She laughed, glad as though song rushed goldenly all through her thoughts.

When he kissed her that night, his arm about her shoulder, he touched her hair, laughing. "Ah, Chickie, you're so sweet."

Her heart was his. She answered: "Barry, I love you so—oh, so—"

Not until the door closed after him and she was in the kitchen, Wildie coming with a slow, luxurious yawn from his corner near the stove, did she think of Jake. Nothing had been settled. They had lost count of him in the delicious sweetness of their own warm emotions. Now she thought of him distantly as though he were a long way from her.

He phoned the next morning: "What night is a good night for the opera, Chickie?"

"I haven't a single night this week."

"That's all right—you've got seven next week."

"But I haven't—really—"

And there came humming over the wires a rich, soft laugh: "I see the way the wind blows, Chickie, my dear. We'll have to try a new tack. Till then, au revoir!"

A thrill of apprehension caught her. Jake was not dismissed. Jonathan was rugged and domineering, straight as a grand redwood again. A broker had come from the Star Oil Refinery and bought up his stock. He had his \$1,375 in his hands again.

"And that's a great, fine man, that Mr. Munson," he said, shaking his head to Chickie. "There's a prince for you!"

Tuesday when Chickie reached home she found the table in the dining-room laid with Jennie's wedding silver; masses of Jennie's violets in the center. She called out: "Hey! Whose birthday is this?"

Jennie in her gray silk dress, lace at the cuffs, though lace was now quite out of date, opened the door and came pattering over to Chickie. Her face and her shy, gentle eyes beamed with lighted pleasure.

"A surprise for you, Chickie!" she whispered like a child in her delight. Jennie took down the best dishes from the little built-in china cabinet, moving with extraordinary care and precision—careful of the lace and the gray silk.

Voices and chuckles; Jonathan's resonant laugh rang out from the kitchen. Chickie pushed the door, motionless with astonishment.

There sat Jonathan, odorous with moth balls—tugged out in his Prince Albert. There, opposite him at the small table, the

two of them like old cronies swapping tips on oil and other stock, sat Jake.

He rose, triumph flashing on his dark, handsome face. He took Chickie's hand, pressing it between both his own, laughing down at her, saying with a boy's ardor: "Chickie, my dear, we're off to the operry—the whole family of us!"

CHAPTER XXXV

AT THE OPERA

JAKE was the king at the feast. "Best dinner I ever had!" His black eyes praised Jennie. He passed his plate for another slice of her flaky apple pie. She blushed, the knife in her hand trembling.

He offered cigars to Jonathan. And, sitting next to Chickie, he hunched his shoulder down cosily, saying with a rich laugh: "Like the surprise we fixed for you?"

Jonathan reached over and patted her hand. "Kind of took your breath away, eh, Chickie girl?"

Though her lips trembled she said, with a meaning look at Jake, "Oh, I've breath enough to blow one where I wish to go!"

He answered, challenging: "So have I! As you see, Chickie dear!"

She got up leisurely, defying him with her eyes. But she stood uncertain and almost in tears at the door of her closet. Now—she would be judged again. Barry would blame her. The fear burned like a hot coal in her breast.

Jennie came in with her long gloves: "See, dear, I cleaned them for you. Wear the blue georgette. You're so lovely in that. Every one dresses so for the opera. Wear your crystal beads. It's nice you have pretty things." She stooped down for Chickie's slippers, the gray silk drawn tight over her plump arms. She took short breaths, so great was her excitement. "Years ago when Jonathan and I heard Madame Patti sing, I wore yellow satin. That was in the old Opera House. It was wonderful. I remember it so well. Hurry, dear—"

Chickie polished her nails with elaborate slowness. Her neck was hot. She said, biting her lips: "You could have phoned and told me about this, Jennie. I like to know things. I didn't want to go—"

"Didn't want to go?" Jennie's chin dropped. A frightened pallor fell like a gray veil over her flushed face. "You didn't want to go? We thought you'd be surprised."

She looked suddenly so crushed and tremulous, Chickie put down the buffer, laughing: "Ho—Jennie, ole dear—what's the matter with you? I didn't mean it that way. Why—well, you see, I would have bought new gloves. Of course, I want to go—"

But she had a sense of being trapped—an overpowering reluctance to step into Jake's limousine.

He said to her kindly: "Chickie, dear, you're not that sore at me, now, are you? Why, I think this was pretty brilliant in your dear friend, Jake. I thought you'd see the humor of it. Take a look behind you, my dear. Isn't Jonathan looking grand as St. Peter to-night? This is a night to be remembered, little white darling."

His exuberance was a magnetic current charging through her with its dynamic warmth. "Chickie, you're a poor sport. Now, I would have thought to get one smile, anyway! Who's hurt if you take an hour of happiness—answer that."

"You could have told me, though."

"Would you have come, then?"

"No."

"That's the answer, my dear. I meant to have you in that box, hook or crook. You'll say it's worth it if there's an ounce of truth in you. I'll gamble on that."

He walked down the center aisle of the auditorium with his flashing, princely air and in spite of herself Chickie felt a high throb of pride. People in the other boxes, arranged parallel with the stage, about two-thirds of the way down the hall, stared at him. Many smiled.

He ushered Chickie to her seat as though she were the only girl in the world. He whispered close to her ear: "Look around, my beauty! Jake's got the brightest jewel in the whole blooming horseshoe."

The scene dazzled. In all the boxes about her superb women sat in the splendor of furs and diamonds. Their long bare arms were white, their hair waved and glossy. They leaned forward murmuring delicately. Chickie's eyes rejoiced in the color, the swaying brilliance.

She caught a look at Jennie's face, vivid almost to pain; at Jonathan, erect and stately. Jennie whispered in awe: "Chickie, dear—My! My!" She could find no further word for her hushed, stupendous enjoyment. Chickie laughed.

"Well—you like it?" Jake asked.

She answered gayly: "'Tis, indeed, gorgeous!"

Jake folded his arms, smiling, leaning down to Jennie and pointing out this celebrity and that. Her startled eyes followed him, wide with gratification.

At the end of the first act, the music stealing through Chickie's senses with soft, pervading glow, her nerves tingling to the taunting passion of the "Flower Song," Lina Cavallieri entered. She passed directly in front of their box. The whole audience stood up, thrilling to the power of that wondrous smile. It went through the house like a radiant light.

Jake whispered: "Chickie dear, now you see. The world loves to kneel to the fair."

"Isn't she perfectly enchanting!"

He pressed her hand, his voice a-throb: "My dear—my dear—yes—enchanting—"

Chickie sat forward, on fire with excitement. Such crowds—such pageantry—and, oh, the rapturous singing; the gay insolence of that Carmen—she gave herself up to the fervor of the music; the poignance of the tragic love story. To the core of her spirit she was glad for these hours of beauty.

They went to the Palace afterward. She and Jake danced. He said softly, his lips moving her hair: "You enjoyed it, Chickie?"

"Yes. Who could help it?"

"I have the box for the rest of the week. Help me fill it?"

"It was glorious, to-night. Every other night this week is taken."

Jake laughed: "You aren't engaged, Chickie, and you aren't going to be married. Well—you said it yourself. But you have every night taken?"

"That's easy. You see I'm exceedingly popular."

"Break a date. That always adds to a girl's prestige. I tell you now it does."

She shook her head.

"So you've fallen that hard, Chickie? You don't even want to go out with any one else? You've fallen in love? But look here, he's a nice youngster and all that, but you can't go out with him every single night. That'll never do! Who's hurt if you give me the evenings he can't fill?"

She was silent.

"Here's something else for you to consider, my dear. That boy's just beginning. It'll be years and years before he can

give you a tithe of the things you ought to have. Now, are you going to sit around and get old and rusty waiting? Are you going to give up all the joys of life? Why, my dear, you'll make an old hag of yourself!

"You owe it to the lad to keep yourself gay and alluring. To-morrow you'll be a thousand times brighter and more interesting because you've had a little spice to-night. Not so, my dear?"

They sat on a red divan at the far end of a corridor, shut off a little from the bright dash of the palm room and the couples moving in and out. Through locked glass doors they saw the machines parked in Jessie Street—lights from the building across the street—now and then a shifty-looking character ambling resolutely into the darkness.

Jake had his hand clasped on Chickie's bare elbow. His eyes sought hers with gay, insistent pleading. But she kept seeing another face—Barry's red to the roots of his hair as he told her there was no other since she had come upon the scene. Barry whispering: "Ah, Chickie, you're so sweet!"

She smiled, answering dreamily: "Yes—it has been lovely—but all the other nights are taken."

"For how long are all your other nights taken?"

"Why—I just can't tell without looking at my date-book, you must know!"

"Chickie—are you the girl who has a friend named Mary? And another friend named Lucy?"

"Indeed, I am that very girl, kind sir."

He shook his head, a touch of sadness in his eyes. "So you think you've changed, Chickie, dear? You think a little love will make you like all that? But it won't. We can get over our love much easier than we can get over our stomachs. Emotions pass, but appetites remain. We don't cease to be hungry; we don't cease to be cold. You'll still want luxurious dinners; you'll still hate that nice black coat of yours."

She sighed: "Are you pushing me into the yawning grave, Jake? But I'm not dead yet!"

"You're running into it yourself, Chickie. You don't seem to realize what you're doing. Why, my dear, the next five or six years are the best and sweetest of your life. You should fill them with pleasures—store up memories for the later quiet. No man has a right to expect you to cease living while you're waiting for him to catch up with you; while you're waiting

for him to earn enough to give you what you should have.

"Think of that side of it. Don't be like other girls, Chickie, and throw away your head because you've found your heart. You'll need both when it comes to men."

"You're a hard lot to manage, aren't you?"

"We are! Now what night shall it be?"

"Please, Jake—you see I'm telling you the truth—"

His fingers drove against her flesh. She looked up at him astonished, found his eyes flaming: "No, Chickie, I can't let you do that. You're making a terrible mistake. You don't see it."

"It's you that don't see, Jake."

"I've looked a long while, Chickie—and I've seen—I see. I've seen girls start as you're starting. I've seen all their charms dim because they thought it fine and honorable to neglect them. They went into seclusion and waited for their man. They grew colorless—tiresome—flat. When the man was ready he looked for fresh flowers. I tell you you've got to keep the garden watered or it will cease to bloom. Let me carry the watering pot, Chickie."

"I don't need it."

"So you'll make me trust to surprises, then?"

"Oh—you won't do this again, Jake? Why, you won't be so lucky the next time."

"You wouldn't close me out like that, Chickie? An old, old friend like me? If you do this, Chickie, if you shut the door on every gayety, I'm telling you you'll regret it."

"You'll find yourself a sorry prophet, Jake! Regret, indeed!"

That night, when finally Jennie, flushed as a girl, gathered the gray satin dress and went out of Chickie's room—Chickie took the orchids Jake brought her, put them in a glass on her bureau. She put them under a snapshot she had of Barry Dunne.

"Well, my own!" she whispered with gay flippancy. "Am I to regret it? Speak—yes or no?" She laughed.

CHAPTER XXXVI

JIMMY'S PROMISE

CHICKIE was in the back garden, snipping ruthlessly through Jennie's bushes. She had half filled a great basket with corn flowers and baby chrysanthemums. Her mother sat at the screen window of the kitchen looking down at her, smiling.

"That's enough now, dear. It's getting cold. Come in." Jennie pulled down the dotted curtains, waddling about the kitchen, putting a pan of baked apples in the cooler, hanging the sauce pans on a rack near the stove. Her plump face had a quiet, satisfied air. That fine Mr. Munson was away. Chickie was staying home—home every night for a week. Jennie took this fact into her thought and fondled it.

Jennie had her own dreams. She saw her beautiful Chickie radiant as a young queen, robed in furs going up the stone steps of a white palace—her home. She saw a big limousine calling at the little yellow cottage on Fair Oaks, carrying herself and Jonathan off to dinner at their daughter's. She fancied the neighbors watching behind the curtains of their little parlors.

These dreams were not Chickie's. For more than the week she had indeed been home—not because Jake was away. Because Barry was working. The evenings were long, pale—but happy. Chickie was young enough to thrill with joy, at the thought of sacrifice. She could have gone to theaters—to dinners and dancing. She swept pleasure aside, accepting martyrdom gayly like a rose in her hair. She said to herself flushing at the boldness: "For you, my own!"

Regret the lost gayeties—not she. Jake kept his word, surprised her twice, coming right out to the house so that she had to go with him to dinner and a show. Then she refused him, because he had insisted on kissing her. Now he was away. She was immensely relieved.

Sometimes at night as she was dropping off to sleep his warnings shot through her ears. Grow stale and colorless? Lose all her charm—even her looks? A few hot, stifling breaths

would catch her. Then she would flip these echoes from her. Why, she felt her mind flooded with lights; her spirit kindled to a manifold vitality.

She even felt kindly to the tart, grouchy Stella Wilson, whose desk was just behind her own. She even bubbled with laughter now when Stella said with her biting insinuation: "Well, of course! If I wanted to do what some girls do!" Indicating, of course, that Stella's virtue was the one and only bar to her popularity. Chickie answered her now: "You'd knock 'em all dead, Stella, only you're just too fine and noble for the men of to-day!" Stella liked that. She believed it.

The days went softly, stepping on flowers. Chickie had no thought of years and years passing so. Her fancy sped the time away, letting her vision rest as it had when she was but sixteen, in a long immortal moment—she and Barry telling each other "I love you."

The basket ran over with a flutter of blue, orange, crimson. She picked it up, saying half aloud: "You gaudy, brilliant things! You look like I feel—perky as the very old Nick."

The alleyway gate creaked—some one coming in softly—Jimmy. He swept his hat off, grinning: "Perky, is it? Good for you, kid! Say, if you feel perky—come on, then, give us a little, will you? Gosh, I'd like like anything to have the works up and sing to-night. Come to show with your brother, Chickie?"

She said, hesitant: "It's too late to go downtown. Just down Mission Street?"

"Anywhere you say, Chickie?"

"Can I go like this? Just put on my coat?"

"Take off your shoes if you like! I'll carry you."

"Feeling strong to-night, Jimmy darling?"

His eyes tightened; he shoved the black hair away from his forehead. "Aw, say, Chickie—well, gee whiz, get a move on, will you? Shall I get your coat?" He took the basket from her, rushing her into the house.

Jimmy was taller and hulzier than Barry. He always held her arm hard, keeping her back with him as he had the night Mary was married. He swung along happily now: "Gosh, Chickie—darn nice in you to come out on a minute's notice. Say, funny, isn't it, but you look to me like the same little kid you did six years ago."

"Jimmy—you brute! I thought I'd grown so perfectly gorgeous."

"You were always that. Say, remember the first time you wore a shirtwaist with a blue and white check skirt? Gosh, didn't you think you were the whole city then?"

"What makes you so reminiscent, Jimmy, old love? You'll have me weeping in another moment."

He grinned: "Haven't been stepping out so much lately, have you? Given the black fellow the gate? Tired of the gay life?" His fingers drove against her flesh.

She tossed her chin flippantly: "And I so young and fair, Jimmy! Now, honestly, you wouldn't want me to be weary so soon, would you?"

"Wouldn't I! Gosh, I'd roll along Mission Street from one end to the other on my head! If you're not sick of it, you seem to be sticking pretty close to the family fireside."

"I take it, Mr. Jimmy Blake, you're keeping tab on me?"

"Darn right I am, Chickie! Glad you've quit the black one."

"Jake? You've heard a few things about him? Well—most of them aren't true. I know it, Jimmy. Jake's really a peach."

"You said it! He's a peach on too darn many trees!"

They stopped outside the movie house to read the announcements, glance over the ads. They passed two or three and kept walking, looking in shop windows. Jimmy dallied along with her, amiable as a girl.

"Awfully nice in you to let me size up the bargains, Jimmy." Chickie pointed out hats in the innumerable millinery shops.

"Go in and try 'em on, if you like."

The night, for December, was warm. Young girls, their arms laced about each other, went prancing in groups of three and four. Married couples, complacent, prosy, gazed about, not talking, absently pushing go-carts. Mothers, with three or four children at their heels, made frantic darts among a hundred automobiles.

"Say, Chickie, this is a nice, homey street, isn't it?"

"Oh, my, yes! Look at that kid there all but crushed to death by that machine."

"Anyway, it has a friendly feeling. Let's not bother with a show. How about a waffle or a sandwich?"

"Or ice cream? I want both—everything."

"And I want to tell you something pretty good, Chickie. Maybe I've got a gall—it's about myself."

When they were seated at a booth in the candy store Chickie said:

"Well, hop to it! Don't keep me in suspense. Are you going to be married?"

He stared at her gloomily. "You'd be glad about it if I were, Chickie?"

"Oh, Jimmy—of course I'd be glad if you were going to be awfully happy."

He said quietly, "I'm not going to be married. I asked you something a little while ago, Chickie. You're not going out as much as you were."

"Oh, I'm giving my seventy-nine suitors a week off! And myself a chance to grab off some beauty sleep."

"You've narrowed the seventy-nine down to two, haven't you? And now it looks as though there's only one. Chickie—can't you tell your old Jimmy about it. I'd tell you. Are you engaged yet?"

"No." She said it so softly, with her head lowered and the blood dashing into her cheeks.

Jimmy spread butter on the waffle, his dark eyes hard on her face. "You're in love, Chickie, aren't you? You love the Redhead?"

She forced her glance upward, her chin trembling, and said with an attempt at flippancy: "What is love, Jimmy—you know, don't you?"

His face grew suddenly white, the boy's mouth, tender for all its strength, snapped: "That's not the kind of love for you to know, Chickie. Say—what do you think. I can go to Honolulu and take charge of a plant there if I want. If I stay here I'll be assistant superintendent. I'll have \$300 a month, Chickie. That's not bad, is it? Going to buy a machine for mother. Aw, gee, Chickie, come through and tell me—why have you been home for this last week and more. Say—I thought—oh, well—"

She clasped and unclasped her hands uneasily, fear for what he might say darting into her eyes.

He saw it and pushed the waffle from him: "Don't be afraid, little kid—I'm not going to wish Jimmy on you." He laughed and slid over on the bench close to her, saying: "Chickie—does

he love you as much as I do? Does that Redhead know how to love you enough?"

She answered, tears in her eyes: "Jimmy, you're an old angel."

"And I live just down the block from another angel and if she ever wants to know what love is, tell her to blow around, will you, Chickie? She'll find it waiting for her—sure as God lives."

CHAPTER XXXVII

LOVE'S SWAY

JIMMY'S eyes all black, his white, excited face moved her strangely. She said, with a little odd pathos, "Jimmy, darling, would you like to see me come trailing my wings in the dust just so you could brush them off?"

"Lord forbid, Chickie!" he grinned. "But if brush you ever need, I'll bet I know who'd give a lot to find it for you." He kept laughing. "Imagine you loving a fellow, Chickie? Say—well, hope he knows how lucky he is."

She felt sorry for Jimmy—dear Jimmy, that she'd loved all her life. She thought of him with a touching beauty, her eyes misted; but as a figure in the distance—the tall boy, with muscles of iron, digging the cave for them in the vacant lot; the mighty one, who set off double-headed dutchmen on the Fourth of July and laughed because they clapped their hands over their ears, screaming.

She didn't think of the Jimmy who sat next her now grinning, but a man's heart pleading and suffering in his eyes. The glory of her own love wrapped about her like a luminous, soft haze, setting her apart as one on a mountain top.

Jimmy was allowed to pass as Jake passed. With a dreamy sadness, sweet as remembered music, she watched them go. She wished to be alone—young priestess in the temple. She wanted to clear her life of all other interests. Sometimes she imagined Barry and herself standing above the world—just they—no breath, no thought, no light, except one through the other—moving so in radiance through eternity.

She told this to him shyly. He laughed. "Kiss me, you sweet, poetic thing. But don't let's fly to the clouds for a year or so. We've not seen the earth yet."

"A year or so, Barry? Why, I thought it was to be at least five or six before we could even think of it."

He colored, drawing a deep, startled breath: "Well—you grow literal indeed! I thought that perhaps on your lighted mountaintop all things would be given us. We wouldn't need

to eat or earn or succeed. As it is—only your dungeon that you don't like a bit—yawns."

She said vaguely, trembling: "I wonder if it is so terrible, after all."

He threw her a sharp, dubious glance and whistled. He was silent for a long while.

This five or six year wait was in the back of Chickie's mind, disturbing, like a small burr that sticks recurrently into the skin, managing, however, to elude detection. She caught herself pausing while she dressed, stopping abruptly in the middle of the street; or falling into a deep meditation in the midst of her typing. She saw the five or six years stretching out in dreary indefiniteness . . . she felt a chill finger pressing down on her heart.

It was borne in on her fiercely, with a little fainting terror one night when Barry came to take her for a ride. He had been working hard. Things hadn't gone right. He was tired. They sat in the car at the beach. He smoked, looking straight before him at the water.

A white moon rose coldly in a leaden sky. A small, delicate cloud fluttered out suddenly, casting this way and that, frightened like a child that is lost. Chickie traced it. She felt sad. She wanted Barry's arm about her. She wanted him to be looking down at her. Her eyes stole about his face, growing warm because he looked so strong and beautiful to her. She wondered why he didn't speak; why he didn't kiss her. With an impetuous yearning she moved her hand along his arm, twined her fingers under his.

"Oh, hello, dear," he said, pulling her to him.

It was pain that she took with a sharp, aching joy. She laughed, feeling her eyes wet: "Hey, there, Redhead! I love you too much."

She knew what Mary meant when she said: "When you love, you suffer—you want to suffer."

Half teasing now, she asked: "Does it make thee glad, Barry, when I smile?"

"It do, indeed, ma'am."

"And broken-hearted when I'm gloomy?"

"Ah—see the whole aorta going to smash!"

She smiled. She thought wistfully: "But that's the way it is with me."

Her mood rose to a sparkling gayety—even when he came to his window and grinned up at her. She couldn't hide the pleased flush staining her cheeks.

Janina became aware of this and used to watch with veiled amusement, sometimes dropping a note on Chickie's desk, other times jabbing her with her elbow and giving a knowing wink. She said one noontime: "So you're putting all your eggs in one basket, Chickie?"

"What do you mean, Janina, dear? Something quite deep and subtle, I take it."

"You get me, kid, all right. After all my years of training behold the fruit of my labors! Well, Red's a nice boy, but have you figured, baby, that by the time he has money enough to keep an expensive decoration like yourself you'll no longer be ornamental?"

"Why so cruel, Janina? My charms will grow with my years."

"You know it! They'll grow wrinkled and yellow like everything else about us. A girl's a fool if she doesn't get herself planted in a beautiful jardinière while she still can grace it. You see it gives one such a nice setting to wither away in. But who do you think is going to furnish handsome pottery for a plant that is already in the sere and yellow leaf?"

"Janina, I thought you were the great believer in love?"

"Chickie—fine talk. Use love—don't let it use you! That's the tragedy of women! Would the most reckless autoist drive a car down a steep grade unless he was sure of his brakes? But that's what this female sex does. They shout: 'Here goes to glory!' Their hearts are the engines—the fools scorn to use their minds as the brake. They think it magnificent to plunge headlong. Well—that road goes over the bank nine times out of ten!"

Chickie laughed. "Grand smash-up—all lives lost. Odd, isn't it, Janina, dear, that the victims don't seem to realize the extent of their injuries? Seem to like their hurts. I know several."

"Lots of bandages in the world to hide our sores from prying eyes, baby. Bad enough to play the fool without shouting it from the housetops. Chickie, do you mean to tell me that a fellow like Jake has no attraction for you?"

Chickie winced—her face scarlet. She said flippantly: "Well,

Janina, soap and water have a great attraction for me. Jake's so nice and clean always and so spirited, of course I find him agreeable."

"That's honester than I expected." Janina crumbled the bread—forgetting Chickie for the moment. Finally she smiled: "Chickie, I believe Jake would marry you."

"And I believe that he shall not!"

"Don't tell me, Chickie, that you'd refuse Jake. If you like him enough to kiss him—oh, don't deny it! Put up any kind of a bluff to your own thoughts, but the girl doesn't live that wouldn't blush and like Jake's arm around her. I don't care how proud and pure she is! All made the same—all have a pulse in our wrists and too many in our hearts. You like Jake enough for that—marry him, and with all the divine luxuries of limos and servants you'd be on your knees with rapture in three months.

"Plant even a very little love in a nice garden and it grows. That's true. And the converse likewise holds. Set the most flourishing love you can find on the rock of poverty and it dies."

Chickie was always a little shaken when Janina tore at the fine silver garment she draped about life, and now especially about love. She saw herself whimsically as a dried-up stalk, its leaves brown and falling. She laughed.

She began to wonder if they might not scheme some way to hasten money and success. She began to save a little.

Then a delightful thing happened. She got a raise of \$15 a month. She was now earning \$125. In a year, if she put away \$25 each month, that would give \$300. Quite a stupendous sum to have all at once—enough to pay down on the living-room furniture!

With a shy giggle she spoke of it to Barry. "I'm turning heiress, Mr. Red. Do you know that in a year I'll have \$300?"

"And what, sweet one, will you do with it? Take a world tour or buy up the Kimberley diamond mines?"

She flushed and smiled. "I have other plans—original-like." Halting, not at all sure of herself, she went on: "Why, my dear, kind friend, I'm to save up. In four years I'll have \$1,200. Isn't that staggering? So you see—why, two people can do quite a lot with vast riches like that!"

His mouth drew straight and pale. She noticed that his hands on the steering wheel clenched, the knuckles shiny. She slid down a little in the seat. He said, without looking at her:

"Chickie, you're not to dream of such a thing! You just enjoy every cent you earn. Four years—why, how do you know what may happen by then?"

She didn't know why, but the hot blood leaped through her veins—then it seemed to move slowly, creeping chill, round and round from her heart to her throat.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

STELLA'S AFFAIR

STELLA WILSON, on her way to the dressing room, passed Chickie's desk. She walked with a kind of angry violence that struck Chickie with curiosity. Half an hour later, Stella had not returned.

A note from Janina dropped in Chickie's lap. "Wonder what's biting the old girl now. Better go out and kid her along. You're good at the soft stuff. Maybe her life-long suitor has given her the ditch as I've predicted he would."

Stella was given to moods of frightful depression. Chickie was tacitly elected by the four other girls in the office to act as sympathizer; to listen pityingly while Stella poured out the grievances of her thirty years.

The office was acquainted with Stella's furious wrongs. She was brought up with two older sisters under strict Methodist discipline. These two sisters were also unmarried and still dependent upon their father for support.

They regarded Stella as "the baby." Even at her present age they exercised vigilant censorship over her personal affairs. If she came home late they or the father and mother demanded an explanation. On the rare occasions when she had a caller they saw that the parlor door was left open. Stella declared that one of the four was everlastingly passing up or down the hall.

The upshot of it was that Stella had no poise, no self-sufficiency, no repose. She was a good-looking girl, but her flighty mind gave the lie to her strong, attractive face. She was a flat failure with men, except for John Bluely. John had been on the verge of proposing for seven years. He was Stella's perennial hope of matrimony.

Twice in the six months she had been in the office he had taken her dancing. She wore roses to work the next day and typed in a dream, believing that at last John had capitulated. At twenty-four she could have married him. Her mother, in some mysterious way—whether by passing down the hall,

sneezing or an inauspicious cough—was credited with scaring him off. He never quite made up his mind again.

Stella considered her life blighted. She blamed her family.

Janina and she had frequent clashes. Once Janina said: "Stella, I'll give you a tip. Follow it and you'll land a husband in a month.

"Here it is—live up to the guarantee given by your phiz. You've got the queenly look, why don't you take your cue from that and sit quiet on your throne when a man comes all primed to bend the knee? Men worship the woman they serve. They think she must be pretty good to get them to her feet. They value the thing that costs whether they've got to pay in money or in time or in labor. Let them hop to it and wait on you. Put them out—inconvenience them—run them ragged! Pay them with a sweet smile, a gentle look—oh, as you will. They'll forget their trouble and remember their gain.

"Another thing—don't flash all your idiotic ideas in the first sitting. They'll keep. Throw a mist over the pool and they won't see how shallow it is. Leave them something to angle for. Once they see to the bottom it's good-by to the best of us!"

At first Stella listened as though the word of revelation were forthcoming. When the dig took on a personal twist, her lips curved with tigerish indignation. She stalked out of the dressing-room, banging the door. She didn't speak to Janina for two weeks.

She had the look of an outraged animal on her face now as Chickie found her sitting on the window sill, smoking. Her eyes were red. She averted her head sharply: "Well—is Lewis asking where I am?"

"No." Chickie slipped her arm about Stella's waist. "What's wrong?"

Tartly, "Nothing!"

"Headache, Stella? Want an aspirin? Janina has some in her desk."

"No, thanks!" Stella's foot was tapping despondently against the wall. "Aspirin! If I had the courage of my convictions, it's not aspirin I'd take!"

"Stella—aw, it's a shame things are so hard for you. Some people get it in the neck, all right, don't they?"

Stella's mouth began to tremble. She pressed her knuckles

against her chin. But she listened avidly to the balm Chickie had learned to pour very soothingly over Stella's hurts.

She kept biting her lip and frowning. Tears trickled slowly into her eyes.

"Humph—well, you'll know of it, anyhow!" Grudgingly she drew an envelope from her pocket and half flung it at Chickie. "Makes it nice for some people, doesn't it? But you bet if I had a gun he'd not get away with it!"

The envelope contained a marriage announcement—John Bluely and Eva Bowman. The wedding had taken place the night previous.

Stella's eyes were now miserable with woe. Short, sobbing breaths shook through her. Chickie was so completely shocked she could find no solace to offer. She stared at the announcement and tucked it carefully back in its envelope.

Stella doubled it over and over. "I suppose you think it's good enough for me? Anything's good enough for a fool!"

Chickie protested weakly. "Didn't you know anything at all about it, Stella?"

"No! Well—he went out with her. She's just been scheming to get him for the last five years—giving dinners and having all her friends roping him in. Lot my people would do for me! At my age—thirty—the last time he called father came in and squatted and never even budged when he was stalling around waiting to say good-night!"

"You had no right to stand for it. You had your own money. Why didn't you meet him on the outside?"

Stella's lips twisted scornfully. "Outside! I didn't have sense enough when John Bluely first met me to come in out of the rain. I was taught to believe that the more distance a girl put between herself and a man the more he strove to win her. Any old time! Perch yourself in the clouds and you'll find some one else in his arms!"

Chickie laughed, but Stella grew hysterical. "You bet—well, you'll all see—after all these years—"

"You were engaged, weren't you, Stella?"

"Of course we were! It was all settled. I didn't have a ring, if that's what you mean. Well—what would you think if a man had been hanging around for seven years?"

The last words trailed. Stella said furiously: "Lord—I can't go back to that office. I'll not go back. When I think of

things! If I had my life to live over again—you bet I'd not be the fool I was."

"Oh, you couldn't do any different, Stella. It wasn't your fault."

"Couldn't do any different! Couldn't I, though!" She nodded her head with angry passion. "Oh, I couldn't? Well, let me tell you, if I was twenty-four again and knew what I know to-day, I'd live!"

Janina's voice, clear and sharp as a little sword, cut through the hot agitation: "You're young yet, Stella! Lots of time. You've still got good looks enough."

Stella threw an imploring glance at Chickie, frowning and touching her pocket where the announcement lay. She turned to the basin and began bathing her eyes. "Don't knock before entering, Janina. It's none of your business! I'm talking to Chickie."

Janina came over and put her arm on Stella's shoulder. "Well, it's too bad, ole kid. I saw it in the papers just now. It's the best thing that ever happened to you. Now you won't be harking back to the time you were twenty-four. Thirty's a good age. Look at it that way, Stella."

"You shut up, Janina Knowles! I don't need any sympathy from you! Chickie, get my hat. Tell Lewis I'm not coming back. Tell him I'm sick."

Janina walked out. "I'll get your hat, Stella. Remember what I said. For a girl of your type, thirty's the best age!"

Janina brought her coat, held it for her. Stella fighting against her reluctance finally asked: "Don't say anything to the others—please? Well—I'll just end it all—if things get any worse."

"Well," said Janina when Stella was gone, "if this is an example of virtue being its own reward, who wants it?"

With a flash of wisdom, Chickie answered: "Don't blame virtue for the sins of stupidity, Janina."

"One and the same, most of the time, Chickie! Takes a clever woman to succeed in spite of her goodness. But I'll admit there's not much hope for the women of Stella's type. The conventions of the past shackled their bodies; the freedom of to-day dooms their minds."

"Takes a real daughter of Eve to be free for joy and not for license. I mean it, Chickie. It's just as I told you—a woman

must use her brains to brake her heart. They can scream at the top of their lungs for equality—they'll never be the peers of men until they become superior to their own emotions. There's the road they've got to travel. If we throw over the restraint we've got to substitute huge gobs of hard-boiled common sense. The girl that gets away with a love affair is the girl that doesn't let it get away with her. Old order or new—Stella was a cinch to lose."

"Do you think she'll commit suicide?"

"Don't be a fool!"

"She told me once that she loved John Bluely so that she could have stretched herself out for him to walk on. That's pretty tough—now."

Janina folded her arms and stared at Chickie until the blood dashed in Chickie's white skin.

"Yes," said Janina, "it's tough—and it's true. Take a leaf from Stella's book, Chickie, or the first thing you know it will be written into your own!"

Chickie laughed. She snuggled her head against Janina's shoulder: "A beautiful critter like me, Janina? Don't sacrifice your sense just to make a good epigram. And at my expense."

"Stella must have been a rarin' beauty at twenty-four! Well—you see what John does at thirty! And men are all alike."

"Good-night, prophet!" Chickie snapped her fingers. The picture of Stella seared into her thoughts.

In the afternoon Janina caught her flirting with Barry Dunne. Chickie went back to her typewriter. Her fingers fumbled over the keys. She made so many mistakes she had to retype four letters.

CHAPTER XXXIX

SEPARATION

It was the night of Bess Abbot's marriage. Chickie was invited to the ceremony. Barry, protesting, but agreeable, escorted her. Aware of his reluctance, but swept with the unconcerned joy of a woman in the forthcoming spectacle, she marched him down the long aisle of the church to the third pew. She was sweetly but firmly determined to "see everything." She whispered to him, brightly: "Aren't we lucky—so near."

He winked: "Why didn't you take me to the altar and make a good job of it?"

She answered thrilled: "I may do that little thing yet!"

A pleased, hushed ripple of excitement murmured up from the vestibule; stately marceled heads turned; the organ sent forth deep, awakening notes of music, vibrant through the edifice as a mighty, elemental voice of prayer. The bride was coming.

Chickie stood on her toes, rapt with excitement. The twins, in big picture hats, dresses of rose and amber, bright as flowers; then Janina, all in gold, the black eyes and olive skin warmed and softened. She walked with a careless brilliance that made the wistful delicacy of the slim Elizabeth, in her white veil and long, shimmering train, appealing and a little pathetic.

Her pale, transparent hand on the arm of her stepfather; her head lowered like a soft white lily swaying on its graceful stem, she seemed to Chickie a symbol of love—pure, beautiful, uncertain. Her heart rejoiced with the instinctive, half sad sense of triumph women experience at a wedding.

She allowed herself to be carried onward with the music, step by step, her imagination kindling until it was no longer a dark, bobbed head under the veil of lace. It was she—Chickie—trembling, but with thundering heart, standing pale and golden at the altar. It was Barry taking her hand. She closed her eyes, drawing her breath with a little gasp. She fumbled for her handkerchief.

He nudged her, grinning. "All touched up, are we?"

She walked out of the church, holding his arm, deep in the exquisite pain of the dream.

When they sat before the fire in the little living-room he said, laughing: "But tell me this, why do the dear frails always weep at a wedding?"

"It's so beautiful. It means so much. It lifts you right out of yourself. Oh, I don't know but it made me think of two people going out together—alone into a world where no one had ever been before and there's something so brave and glorious about that."

"Only it ain't, these days! They leave the gate back wide open and they buy a round-trip return ticket in case they don't like the new country well enough to stay."

"Not every one! Don't you think they'll be happy?"

"Sure they will. If not with each other—with some one else."

"Janina says that's all a pose with Bess. She's not half as bored and sophisticated as she sounds. Underneath she's really an idealist."

"But when her ideals interfere with her desires, out they'll go! Mark my words for that."

Chickie answered absently: "She seemed like an angel to me."

Her thoughts loitered deliciously at the lighted altar, the candles glowing like holy smiles over the flowers. What a sacred moment to stand—the two of them—their hands together—before an altar. How tender and beautiful these mighty promises. Love and to cherish—always.

Swept far out in this deep tide of emotion, she whispered: "Barry—did you wish anything to-night?"

"I wish something right now."

"What?"

"That you'd kiss me."

"But I mean when they were standing together and were giving the promises."

"Listen—don't hold your head down when you ask sweet words like that. Look up. There, keep your eyes open—so pretty she is!"

"Answer what I asked, Barry—please." She felt her heart melting. She reached her hand to his neck and drew his head down. "Did you?"

He was laughing, his eyes close to hers, intent and warm—a flush staining his forehead: “Meaning, sweet one, did I wish it were thee and I?”

“Oh—did you wish that?”

“Do I?”

“Now, Barry, right away, and not wait the four or five years?”

“Now, Chickie—” She sank in his arms, overpowered and stilled with the tumult of her feelings. He murmured, “Yes—I wished that!”

She crept softly into her room that night, moving as in a golden light. She knelt before the open window. Because of the happiness in her heart, so deep, so piercing, she cried.

He loved her as much as she loved him. The look in his face—his lips parted—

She saw him walking down the block, buoyant as a morning breeze. She heard him whispering as he left: “You’re the dearest thing in the world.” The sweet echoes chimed in her thought. She couldn’t sleep.

Nor could Barry Dunne sleep. He walked up and down his room, hands in his pockets. He took off his collar and flung it on the chiffonier.

And he paused, seeing Chickie’s beautiful eyes tremulous, waiting for love, feeling her hand, warm as velvet, reaching to his neck. A smile spread over his face. Ah—the sweet angel—pretty head against his shoulder. She loved him like that—wanted him now.

He began to walk again. Finally he sat on the edge of the bed and kicked off his shoes. He was cold, filled with uneasiness. He got into bed and began to read.

The words brought no thought to his crowded mind. He turned the pages viciously, saying to himself: “Hell!”

He had a spent feeling—a burning agitation as he went back over that scene in the little living room. He wondered if he had agreed to marry Chickie without waiting. Did she take his impulsive wish as a promise? Did she accept it as definitely settled now?

He could feel the yielding sweetness of her arms about his neck. He tried to shake his head free. She couldn’t think that. He had already told her definitely. He had no money. He had his mother dependent upon him.

He would tell her again—make it plain. He would have to. No use evading—

An idea of himself standing on a bluff, pursued by a hurricane, by a flame, held his thoughts trembling. But he would not jump—not into that. The prospect of marriage repelled him. He wasn't ready for it. He had work before him. The success of his whole life demanded these few years of unhampered effort. He dared not throw them away. He wouldn't. No one should ask it—

To-morrow after lunch he would ask Chickie to take a walk. He would find out what she thought. No sooner was this decision established than his sensitive imagination brought her before him, sweet face turned to his with the tender, gentle acquiescence that had flushed his veins like wine. Now he could see her eyes cowering from him in the hurt he would give.

He tossed the magazine to the floor, switched out the light.

Noon the next day, Chickie waited at the table. She watched men and girls getting their trays. Smiles played in and out about her lips.

One o'clock he hadn't come. Just the day she wanted—oh, so much, to see him. In a grieved rush of disappointment, tears sprang into her eyes.

All afternoon she kept glancing across the alley. Her ardent wish failed to bring him from the shadow.

That night he phoned. He was busy. No, he couldn't come—well—he didn't know about to-morrow—

"Barry—you sound so far away!" A shy laugh—"Why, you sound frozen—"

"I'm tired, Chickie—that's all."

The next day she ate alone. But at five o'clock he met her. He was pale—lines at his full-cut, winsome mouth.

"Thought we could go out to-morrow night, Chickie, but I've not finished. Awful lot of work. You see, Tufts is away—I'm doing all his stuff. Great chance for me—"

"So many things I wanted to talk about. Barry—you know—" The wistful, young girl eagerness of her lighted all anew the warmth in his senses.

He said with impetuous ardor. "Ah, listen, Chickie—we'll have to talk about all those sweet things. They'll keep, won't they? You know we've a long time—we've years and years just for talking, haven't we?"

He saw then, just for a moment, what he hated to see—her eyes taking the hurt, covering it quickly.

She said blithely, "Oh, my, yes! No hurry at all—at all."

Riding home in the car, the full sweep of it went through her. Years and years just to talk in.

She held a newspaper rigid and motionless before her. Oh, she knew what he meant. She took the barb and drove its point, cruel and ruthless, through her heart.

A whole week she ate alone. Each night he phoned. This only made her bitter. Yet at noon her feet drew her with aching desperation to the cafeteria.

One day looking down at the bracelet he had given her for Christmas—a thin gold band with lacy carving and a pretty amethyst in the center—looking at it through misted eyes, she saw a form moving to her table, sitting opposite.

With a racing gladness flushing her face, she raised her head, heard a rich, kind voice: "That look for me, Chickie, my dear?"

It was Jake.

In her pique and loneliness she turned with a hard gayety to Jake.

CHAPTER XL

JAKE'S COMEBACK

"Was that look for your long-lost Jake, Chickie?"

"Of course! Do you think I cast smiles like that into empty space?"

"I thank you, my dear. I'm not too particular. Chickie, I've a brilliant hunch. Take a sneak from work this afternoon. Fine days like this the gods meant us to enjoy."

Jake was in his most exuberant spirits—all flash and smile. His pleased glance going over her in warm open admiration touched her like sun shooting through bleak shadow—balm to her sore, young pride.

She said gayly: "Oh, do the gods whisper all their secret hopes to you?"

"I should say! I'm kept in touch with all the higher-ups. I assure you Providence decrees you shall ride down the country with one very good friend and have dinner at a little old way-side inn."

"Well—I'd love that well enough."

"Be a sport, then! If Mitchell raises a fuss, tell him to go to! Tell him your grandmother's uncle died and left you a fortune and if he wants to can you, pish—you should worry! We'll kill the uncle and get the fortune!"

"I take it, Mr. Jake—"

"Look here—can't you remember a man's name from one day to another?"

"I say 'Mr.' as a term of affection."

"I'll find you a better one than that, my dear! But proceed, omitting affection."

"I take it, Jake, something very salubrious happened to you to-day."

"It happened just a moment ago, when I caught something that's mine now, whether it was meant for me or not. Here, you don't want that stale looking stuff! You've been toying with it for the last ten minutes. We're on our way!" He picked up her purse, stuck it in his pocket, hurried her down

the cool, half-dark hallway. "We'll have a day to be remembered."

"Give me the purse, Jake, and cease your raving."

But he stopped before a telephone booth at the entrance of the building: "Step in there, Helena, and tell your little lie to Mitchell. Now! It's all settled. Why, Chickie, one would think you had a hundred lives to live the way you throw aside joy. Only young and fair once in this vale of tears. I'll bet you haven't missed a day's work since you started. Why, I wouldn't give a snap for the girls in my office if they didn't wheedle me out of five or six days in a year!"

"But I shouldn't, Jake. I know I shouldn't."

"That's one very good reason why you should. This sense of duty is a fatal handicap to happiness. Step in! I'm going to have you down the line with me this afternoon if I pick you up bodily and carry you off screaming."

He swung his shoulders with a high, jaunty air. She laughed—a bright, reckless assent, her eyes all at once sparkling. She did as he wished.

As Jake helped her into his car there came into her mind—vital, imperious, young—the face of Barry Dunne as he challenged her when she inclined to the luxurious joy of the yachting trip. She shut it from her with a hot, defiant passion: "I don't care! You should have much to say! You care so much!" Her hurt was a raw, open cut, throbbing in her mind.

They went dashing through the bold hills of the bay shore cutoff.

Far flung and high the land rolled out before them
The early poppies spattered the grass with burning gold.
Flag lilies and buttercups danced about the slopes.
And then between the mountains marched the shiny sea.

Chickie running away from work, running from that window across the alley into the wide open beauty, the beaming color of the warm Spring day, felt a ripple of defiant gladness. Nice in Jake to come just when she was so deep in gloom her heart was a lump of lead; gay to be swinging so merrily down the valleys. She looked at him gratefully and smiled.

"Now, I want to know, Helena Bryce—how are you? For you see the high gods gave us the Spring to let us perceive it's O.K. with them if it's O.K. with us. I may not bring you back, since such is such!"

She threw him a startled look of fear. He slowed the car and touched her hand.

"See here, Chickie, that's not the way I want you to look at me. Understand? Some one of these days you're going to come and put your arms around me and kiss me because you want to—because you want to like anything—as you say yourself. Till then you're as safe as a babe in the madonna's arms. I'm telling you something."

He began to laugh, his black eyes touching her like wild fire; sending a strange, expectant shiver through her. "And, Chickie—shall I tell you something? I've a wish I never had before. You know I'd like to have Helena Bryce think me the finest fellow in the world. I'd rather like to be that for her—"

She said eagerly, a catch in her voice, a sudden ache opening in her heart, "Oh, would you? I do think you're fine. I've thought it right along. I think you are just kingly."

The red lips sobered. He said quietly: "I want more than that, Chickie. I mean to have more than that. I'm going to have it. You see—I know what I want from life, Chickie, dear—so I get it. You don't know what you want. That's a mistake. I've told you this before. You ought to take a vacation and think the whole thing out. Make up your mind what you're after; set your vision on it; keep it there. It will come to you. I know. But if you don't have your goal set, you're likely to land where you never in the wide world intended to go."

"Oh, I know what I want! Indeed I do."

"Are you sure that your head wants it as well as your heart?"

"Well, it doesn't pay to be too greedy, does it? We can't satisfy both all the time. Like a big family, there's always sure to be one with a grouch."

He glanced at her a little sadly. "Chickie, I had an idea you'd call it all off."

"I don't know what you mean, Jake."

"Yes, you do. I mean your heart. I thought you'd called it home again."

She laughed nervously. "Ears it has, but it hears not! That's the way a heart is. Did you know that? It goes where it will and it stays till it breaks!"

"Young hearts break easily, Chickie. They're very brittle. After a while they learn to bounce. Then they're happy, and we are, too. I shan't mind a break or two—even a very bad

break. But what is it you want from life—tell me, will you?"

"You promise to get it for me?"

"I promise that."

"Quite a large order, my kind Lord Bountiful. I want just oceans—coming in with gigantic waves all dazzling—look—"

They were now far up in the hills around Burlingame. Soft clouds of white shot through with rose drifted about a pink stone palace surmounting a landscaped bluff. She pointed to it.

"Suppose I ask for that? Is it mine?"

"Could you do with an acre or two less than that?"

"No, sir! Not an inch less."

"Want it enough, my dear—it shall be yours."

They went circling about the magnificent places. Chickie's eyes drank eagerly the wild loveliness of the gardens; the deep-toned harmony of line and color in the architecture. She had a burning curiosity to enter these stately homes, be invited to tea—oh, just somehow saunter through the gorgeous rooms. She said with childlike impulse to Jake:

"Well, do you know Janina was in one of these places where the women had five closets just stacked with clothes and a hundred pairs of shoes—there must have been that many, for Janina stopped counting when she got to thirty-nine. I'd love to get into some of those closets, rummage among them—maybe drop a rag or two out the window—crafty-like and you down in the lawn to catch it! Would you?"

"If I'd known you had this hankering, Miss Bryce, I'd have taken you through that one we passed about a mile back. I know the owners. Next time we're down here"—he paused, mirth on his lips—"the very next time we're down here, Chickie, suppose we go through it."

"Really—you mean that, Jake?"

"Yes—"

"Soon? Why, you don't know I've just ached to get into one of these places for years."

"Name the day, then, my dear!" He caught her hand suddenly, pressing it hard between his palms. "I've ached for a thing or two, Chickie. Are you happy just now? Like my brilliant hunch—and the pair of us playing hookey together?"

"I love it!"

"Then we'll do it again. How's Saturday?"

"I—I don't know—well—" All at once little movements

trembled on her lips. She felt tears rush to her throat, pelting there hotly. She kept pinching her thumb till it was pointed as a mandarin's. "I'm not sure about Saturday, Jake."

"Please, Chickie. Take a tip from me—an old dog, Chickie—won't hurt your case. Saturday at noon—lunch at the Palace, then down here and rummage through the closets. How's that?"

"I suppose that's lovely."

"Lovely is good enough for me, my dear! So that's that!"

Half a dozen times during the afternoon she started to say: "No, I can't come with you Saturday. I forgot a date. Oh, I can't break it!"

She grew nervous. Her thought brought Barry Dunne before her. Her thought pleaded eagerly with him. She imagined his young, ardent eyes hard with scorn. She tried to shut them out. They followed her.

But she let the date stand.

CHAPTER XLI

THE BREACH

HER pillow was damp. She turned it over and pressed her face against the cool fabric. Then she switched on the pretty blue lamp over her bed and reached for a book. It was a book Barry had given her—the story of Ethan Frohm.

But she didn't read. She sat upright and let her thoughts and her emotions beat and exhaust her with the battle they waged. Her love railed against her resentment; in the end love won, leaving her shaken with regret because she had allowed Jake to lure her into another date.

Her thought protested: "I have a right to take a little pleasure! He doesn't care! He's hardly let me see him this whole week. He means that about waiting years and years. Why, he thinks I'm anxious! As though I'm throwing myself at him! And he must remind me—oh!"

Love answered: "He's working like a slave. He can't run from the office as you did! And didn't he say he wished it could be right away? He loves enough to wait and wait—"

"Ah, yes—and didn't his eyes go down like holy lights into her heart? And didn't his arms sweep about her as he whispered: 'Chickie—I wish it could be now!'"

She was drawn back to the piercing tenderness of that moment when the tumult of her feelings stilled her; when she had seen the flush staining warmly to his forehead, his lips parted. He called her "the dearest thing in the world." And, oh—he meant it! She knew that—well enough.

The room filled with images of him; as he stood that Sunday morning at the Abbots', his profile etched in glory against the clear Autumn sky; as he came swiftly toward her, looking up, laughing, saying with his lips, "I love you!" As he smoothed her hair from her forehead he murmured, "You're beautiful! Chickie, you're so sweet!"

These images spoke to her; they sent the tide of emotion warm and high. As its gentleness suffused her, she was ashamed of the day given to Jake; ashamed of the shallow

anger, the hurt vanity. Regret for the thing she had done sharpened like a pointed tooth in her mind.

Running down the country with Jake because she was piqued! Furious with Barry because he had to work nights and couldn't entertain her, because he happened to say lightly that they had years and years to talk. Ah—that was a mean, petty way for her to act!

But she would make amends. She would be worthy of the fine, strong beauty she saw in him. There would be no "next time" with Jake; no long drive through the hills; no more dinners at quaint, out-of-the-way places that only he might know. Oh—she would give it up, and gladly. Love bathed her in its sad, terrible humility.

She went to work the next morning in a state of exaltation. Yesterday she would wipe away. She wouldn't speak of it. But there was the future—all of it, bright with promise. And it was for him.

She phoned to Jake. The girl answered that he was out of town. He would be in the office Saturday morning. Time enough! She would call him then—say she couldn't possibly go.

The fervor of her resolution made her radiant; filled her with a happy mirth. Janina observed and made her own deductions, which she promptly conveyed to Chickie in a note:

"Not such a babe in the woods, after all, huh? Glad to see you're not going to follow in our dear Stella's footsteps! Have a nice li'l trip and get back 'as was.' We got your stall, ole dear, but Mitchell didn't. Better look a little pale. Remember, you were too ill to work yesterday!"

Reading this, Chickie's mood dropped a few degrees from its rapt intensity. It dropped still further when at noon, Stella Wilson, with the selfish unconcern of those swathed in melancholy, insisted on accompanying her to lunch.

Stella's desperation had now mellowed into a tearful sentimentality. She was no longer furious against John Bluely; she was sorry for him. She had discovered the reason—how or where, she didn't mention—for his marriage to Eva Bowman. It was a reason, of course, that puffed to huge dimensions Stella's pricked and suffering egotism.

John had not forsaken her. Never of his own wish would

he have chosen another. His spirit still was hers. He had married Eva only because of business complications with her father. Dragged into it! This explanation offered a fine, stout crutch for Stella's vanity. She was now free to follow John on the tragic road of his bitter marriage to the ultimate misery she was perfectly confident would be his.

She was also free to return to the dream of John that had warmed her hopes for seven years. She now took some faded snap shots and pushed them across the table to Chickie. There were half a dozen poses of a young man, bonny and laughing, a girl, vivacious with the wondrous, fresh beauty of youth.

Chickie looked at them and gasped.

"Wouldn't know me, would you? Don't look much like that now, do I?"

The change from the lightsome face of the girl in the picture to the hardening features of the still handsome Stella was not the thing that shocked Chickie. It was the odd resemblance she fancied between this girlish Stella and herself—a kind of bright eagerness as though her white hand held a gift and offered it—a frank joyousness—she didn't know what it was exactly—perhaps only the love she fancied in Stella's eyes. Whatever the similarity, it frightened her now to see it. She would admit nothing in common between herself and Stella Wilson.

She said hurriedly: "Oh, I don't see much difference. You look about the same. This is John? You loved him terribly, didn't you?"

Stella reached for the pictures. She said grimly: "He loved me just as much! Humph—fine for some people the way things turn out, isn't it? If I had it to do over again—"

"What would you do, Stella?"

"Take while the taking was good!"

In the week just passed Chickie had found Stella's face. Stella's bitter words coming into her mind relentlessly. Especially when she sat at lunch waiting for Barry and Barry hadn't come. She heard with a faint clutch of terror in her ears, Janina's cynical: "Men are all alike! Take a leaf from Stella's book, Chickie, or the first thing you know it will be written into your own. Get yourself planted in a beautiful jardinière while you still can grace it!"

Now—in the present highly sensitive state of her feelings

she felt Stella's misery like a load of iron clamped on her neck. She was in a frenzy of anxiety to see Barry Dunne, to have her absurd fears brushed aside by the glad joy she would find in his eyes.

He was coming that night. She wore her hair high on her head because men liked it so. Jimmy used to say it was just "darn wickedness" in her to be so attractive. She put on a dress of green. That made her eyes so dark—her hair so bright.

And she rushed to the door when he rang. With an impulsive ardor that seized her like a sudden breeze she raised her face, laughing to him.

When he kissed her gayly, when he said with the lilt in his voice: "Ah—the fair one is glad to see me?" she felt like singing, like flinging out a mighty "Oh, hurrah!"

He went on breezily: "All prettied up, aren't we? The dear, blessed damozel, and no mistake. Ride or sit—which? Beautiful night for any little thing."

They rode. She slid low in the seat, glancing up at him, already tremulous with relief and pleasure. She said airily: "Twice seven days in this week. Not so!"

"There were, indeed. Funny cases came up—" He began to talk quite rapidly and brightly. And she was always a little in awe of his mind. He knew so much; quoted so freely a hundred poets she had never even heard. To-night she would have liked much better if he had just looked down at her, saying warmly: "Ah—I miss the dear frail!"

They stopped on a wide bluff that rises nobly from the ocean at Lincoln Park.

The gate stood open, dark and free. No veil of silver fog; no drape of purple mist. Black and austere the shoreline was etched against the sky. That night walked chaste in self-abiding beauty.

She moved toward him, touched with a sudden loneliness. She waited for his arm about her. He smoked absently.

Her hand stole to his and she said with a rush of eager tenderness: "I missed you, Mr. Red. How about you? Do you get mad when you have to work so hard?"

"A raving maniac!" He laughed, recounting odd quirks he discovered in the old people who came to the office. He talked and talked. And she had the bleak, chilled notion that he talked to evade her—to put her at a distance from him.

She sat quiet, her hands clasped in her lap, unaware of the

soft, white beauty of her neck; the winning sweetness of her lowered eyes. Suddenly she felt his glance.

His voice was low: "What did you think of Ethan Frohm?"

"The saddest thing I ever read. It was too cruel."

"But that's life, Chickie."

"It didn't seem right to me. They loved each other so—"

"It wasn't right!" His eyes then, beautiful as she wanted them to be, struck down through hers, opening the radiance in her heart. "Ah—right!" He laughed softly, his arm for one swift moment catching about her. "Love has the first right. Not so, Chickie? Don't you know that? By heaven I know it! They were cowards—"

"What should they have done? What, Barry?" She felt her heart swelling, holding her breath mute.

"What none of us has courage enough to do—well—so it goes—"

His arm dropped from her quietly. She thought with instinctive understanding, "He doesn't want to love me! He fights against it. He's afraid to love me!"

A dozen times her hand went reaching to his arm. She drew it back.

He kissed her good-night and waited, as though he wished to say something. She wouldn't help him, wouldn't look up. She was ashamed of the brimming eyes.

He could chill his feeling for her. She would crush hers! Beat it down. Indeed, she would.

She said to herself bitterly as she hung up the lovely green voile: "Well, Stella, ole thing—stretch yourself out and be walked on!"

The next morning—Saturday—she didn't phone to Jake.

CHAPTER XLII

COMPETITION

As one o'clock approached the pale nervousness that all morning held Chickie taut with excitement had just mounted to pain. She caught up the telephone, put it down again, biting her lips. No—let the date stand!

She had suffered last night—lain awake long, aching hours after Barry Dunne had gone. Her young ardent heart, all aglow with the consuming tender purity of a first deep love, drew back to itself the flame it had offered. The flame burned inwardly with a deadly hurt.

Barry didn't want her love. Oh—he was making that gently clear. It would interfere with him. He had work to do—success to win. Brush away obstacles—love—her—anything—

Even in the dark of her own room, even lying with her face against the pillows, her thought, raised proudly, ordered the tears back. She should break her heart about it! She should throw away her youth wildly hoping and waiting as Stella Wilson did. Better to let it end—now—

In the dressing room she pulled the small blue hat coquettishly down to her dark, appealing eyes, letting a touch of gold hair show at her ears. She would look gay; she would laugh merrily. No one in the world should know.

But she went out of the building to the limousine where Jake waited and at every step her trembling apprehension grew. She cast about her anxiously like one afraid of pursuit.

As Jake, sweeping his hat low, met her she stepped breathlessly to the car. She wanted to get in—be off—escape.

She took her seat. She looked up—then down. For a moment her senses reeled. Barry was there—on the sidewalk—staring, first a shock, then a fury of accusation in his eyes. He bowed and passed. Chickie's day was ruined.

She had a crazy impulse to jump out and run after him, stop him on the street and explain—oh, tell him how her heart was broken. She sat limp and motionless.

Jake appeared not to notice. He became busy with the engine. She was thankful for that.

But when he saw her idling with the lobster, separating it with her fork and not eating, his shoulders stiffened, his smiling, vivid mouth, rich with much enjoyment, sobered.

"Got something to tell you, Helena Bryce. Kindly take notice of your good friend Jake sitting opposite you. See that big, loose-limbed lantern jaw yonder? Fellow with the pretty little black wench?"

She laughed.

"Well—he made me what I am. Because of Lloyd Woodman and a thing he did ten years ago, Helena and I are able to spurn choice lobster to-day. Please ask me how come!"

"How come, sir?"

"Competition. I was loafing along, making a little, wasting much. Lloyd Woodman steps angrily to the scene. A hustler—a tremendous rival. In three months he had taken four of my clients; he had a machine. That got my goat—whipped me up. I threw off my coat and my gloves—I wore them in my dandy days—I went to it and won. Chances are I'd be grubbing by at \$200 a month to this day if it hadn't been for Lloyd. Nothing pulls you up on the bit—business or love—like a sizable second busy on the job. You didn't know that, did you, Chickie, my dear?"

Her face, quiet and pale, stained brightly. Not venturing to raise her eyes, she smiled: "You're very clever, Jake. You know almost as much as Janina!"

His laugh rang out. "A compliment, indeed, my dear! But I'm telling you something for all that. Let a man think some one else wants his job and immediately it becomes a prize to grip like a bulldog; let a fellow see that some one else may steal his girl and if there's a heart in him he's on his feet fighting!"

So Jake had seen. He wanted her to feel tranquil now and at ease.

"Well," she said slowly, "it's a poor kind of love or ambition that must be driven by some one else's engine."

"Not driven by it, Chickie—only spurred a little. Afraid the other may reach the goal first."

"Anyway! If I should ever love."

Jake smiled, a half-sad amusement in his eyes: "Yes, Chickie—if you should ever love—well, what about it?"

"I wouldn't need any other around to tell me of it or to make me warmer."

"You'd just up and burn to death, eh? But don't you do

that, my dear! It's the one insanity a beautiful woman dares not risk."

"Why—why that's the only way at all—love with everything or not at all!"

"How old, Chickie? Twenty-one? Now, see here, men aren't big enough to take a love like that. It knocks them off their feet, stirs up an awful dust of vanity in their eyes. When a woman offers that kind of love, Chickie, it's just as though she held up one of those distorted mirrors. The man sees himself a giant—a king—and he sees the woman a pigmy."

"Why should a girl always be the one to bother about this and that and pleasing a man? It's most contemptible!"

"She shouldn't please the man! Please herself! Haven't I been drumming that into your sweet head? I'll 'larn' you yet, my dear. Do as you want and don't give a hang about their likes and they'll like it—that is if the girl has Helena's face. When have you ever bothered to toss me your smiles? When have you even troubled to entertain me ever so little? But here I am."

She smiled, but, oddly touched, answered: "I'll do better, Jake. Maybe you think I'm very selfish."

"Let be as is! Better might be worse! I've much more to say on this score, Helena, dear."

He said it when at length they had stepped into the stone mansion and the caretaker was showing them about. Chickie walked quickly, her eyes everywhere, an eager tightening through every nerve. She whispered like a guilty thief: "The closets, Jake! Aren't I to see seventeen rooms full of clothes?"

"Open the doors then—quick! Nobody'll catch us!"

They came into a white room—bare—not even a rug. A maid was sorting over hats and shoes. The doors of closets were open. Chickie saw so many hats it might have been a millinery shop. She caught a glimpse of evening wraps—one of green brocade with a wide collar of chinchilla. She pinched Jake's arm. "Get it—quick! That one I must and shall have!"

He caught her hand and squeezed it, his eyes flashing: "Look at yourself in that glass, my little white darling! Now tell me the sweet things of life mean nothing to you."

"Did I ever say that, Jake?"

"I've an awful fear you may try to act it. And ye do, ye'll walk over Jake's dead body! It's an insult to life when we don't set the prettiest jewels in our best carving. Ever think of

that, Chickie? Now take this woman here—homely. I'm telling you she has teeth like a horse. Those clothes don't belong to her by any right of gracing them. They should be yours. You want to travel, too, don't you, Chickie?"

"Don't wear me out asking my wants, sir."

"I've an idea, Chickie, that it would be riotous fun sailing round the world with you. Haven't seen much, have you?" He had taken her arm. They were now walking out to the garden. Tulips were red and gold and pink, and there were white and purple hyacinths. Spring danced in young, happy color all about the slopes.

"They're at the softest, sweetest in the first blooming, Chickie. Now what a cruel shame if we choked them up with weeds."

"I don't know why, Mr. Jake, but you make me very sad."

"Sad only that you may be for a long while glad, Chickie. I'm waking you up. I'm making you see a little. And you want to stay blind. That's why you're hurt. Open your eyes very wide and look at all the beauty life is ready to yield you—that shouldn't make you sad." He leaned down and with his eyes on hers asked, still laughing: "Chickie, you like me some—quick—no one is looking—not a soul for twenty miles—a kiss—please—"

She shook her head: "Call again to-morrow, sir. I'm all out of the ingredients to-day."

"I'm calling for many to-morrows—mind you that, Chickie! You'll do well to have me come. Use me, my dear. I shan't mind that at all. Men, young men or old, are so much keener to stay if they know the door is wide open to let them go."

She was fascinated by Jake's ready speech. She wondered if he spoke the truth. Would Barry want her more, seeing Jake so eager? She grew excited and a little ashamed, thinking this. Yet for all that, her heart leaped with a beaming hope. Oh—too late now to crush down the singing passion. She loved him—wanted him—young, full of gayety—a glory on his upturned face—the sweetness of his full-cut lips. Why should he go—

When Jake said to her again, "I'm to come for you Monday night, my dear—the show—Wednesday—Friday—three out of seven—that's fair enough."

"I don't know, Jake—that's too many. No—"

"But it's yes! It's decreed!"

She was all unnerved thinking of it. Her heart was a raging

hot coal. One moment she saw Barry turning from her with scorn; the next rushing to her, a challenge in his eyes.

She got up early Sunday morning. She kept running up from Jennie's garden to the hall, wondering if the phone would ring. He always called Sunday mornings.

It rang; his hour—just nine. She took down the receiver and waited, unable to speak. Her own breath suffocated her. She was afraid to hear his voice. She said weakly, "Hello!" and then, "Oh, you've called?"

CHAPTER XLIII

RECONCILIATION

His low, uncertain voice throbbed through her with a mingled pain and joy. "Chickie, want me to come out?"

"If you want to come."

"Is that the way you feel about it? Don't care whether we have the ride down the country or not?"

"Oh, I don't know." She laughed with questing nervousness. "I've never been very hesitant about things, Barry!"

A long pause. For a cold, stilted moment she feared he had gone—hung up on her in this grim quiet. Then he said: "Well, shall I come?"

"Yes!"

She went humming down the hall—eyes wet, heart singing, world all a-sun again. Day in the country, they two together under a tree. Arm in arm, talking to each other; rejoicing in each other's look. Oh—let him say what he would! Let him flash scorn at her. She would laugh in his face! She would laugh at anything. For he had come to her. She had flouted him; run away with Jake before his very eyes. And now he came and asked her humbly did she want him.

Her mood dashed from fervor to fervor—happiness exaggerated because of the misery preceding it. She made sandwiches for their lunch. She cut them into fantastic shapes. There had come to her a radiance of peace as though now would never again dawn the faintest misunderstanding. They loved each other—oh, simple—the heart settled it.

She flung the door wide for him, ignoring the pale formality of his greeting. She snapped her fingers, murmuring gayly: "But you're here, Mr. Red! Keep your cold looks!"

He had a box of candy in his pocket, the yellow cord tying it showed. She tapped it impishly: "A peace offering, Red?"

He grinned: "Well, the nerve of some people's widows! Why should I bring the peace when you made the war?"

"Did I though! I thought I only fired the first gun—the war was there already. Is it over now?"

He drew a long breath, his mouth straight: "Any lunch for to-day? Takes a long time to draw up a suitable peace treaty, you know."

And after they started she found him now and then watching her, an intent, dubious fixity in his glance. It made her uneasy.

She began to talk—surcharged with emotion and suspense. Glorious day—look at the flowers—oh, did you see that squirrel? And finally: "So you're angry with me, Barry? And you've only come out to tell it?"

"Why, no—what makes you think that?"

"Rather quiet, aren't you?"

"Well—in a way. But I don't want to quarrel with you, Chickie. You don't blame me for being shocked, do you?"

"You mean that I went out with Jake? You mean about yesterday?"

"Well—suppose you were rushing down to meet me and I gave you a breezy nod and went flying off with some other dame—what would you have done?"

She didn't answer, for she had a withering image of herself suddenly watching Barry go off with another. She sat mute with the sense of bleak devastation.

"What would you have thought or done, Chickie?"

"I think I would die, Barry." Looking up, it shocked her to see a flush, an exultance light his face.

"As much as that, Chickie? Do you mean it?"

"I let you see it far too plainly, Mr. Red. I shout that I love you. And a girl should never do that. Then you grow afraid. Oh, I know! And you run away."

"Ah—don't say that, Chickie. I might tell you a few things you don't realize. I think I'm going to. But the part I can't figure is that you seem to like going out with Jake."

"He's awfully kind. But I didn't enjoy myself one bit yesterday."

He asked eagerly: "I spoiled it for you, Chickie! Please tell me—did you keep thinking of me?"

"How can you be so vain? You, indeed!"

"I'm not vain. If I were I wouldn't need the approval of others. But I do. That's my great weakness. And when I see a handsome fellow like Jake playing around I don't understand how you can prefer me. If you really did you wouldn't

keep making dates with him. This isn't the first one. You've not told me of them. But I've heard."

The increasing swiftness of his speech filled her with a strained excitement. He grew pale and as he talked looked straight before him, eyes on the road.

She said weakly: "You're not fair. You really forced me to go out with him. You scarcely noticed me for a whole week. You didn't come to the window. Oh—I'm not so thick! I knew what you meant when you said we had years and years just to talk—"

A scarlet wave rushed to his temples; his lips moving, but not speaking—

"And Friday night—oh, you remember—it wasn't what you said or anything you did, but I could feel! I could feel things striking through me. You wanted me to understand. I did. I can't stay home always. Jake doesn't care how much I put him off or how uninteresting I am. He comes and comes. And nothing is too much for him to do."

He said only: "Shall we go to the same place?" And he took her hand, pulling her up the little hill. He didn't look at her.

Crushed by his silence, she knelt on the ground, unwrapping the lunch. The gay little sandwiches mocked her. She was more than half crying now, when he said quietly:

"I don't blame you, Chickie. Not a bit of it! You have a right to have all the fun you can. Jake's got the coin to give it to you. I'd probably fall for it, too, if I got the chance. Big limousine—opera—theaters. Takes money to toss off twenty a night or more and never wink at it. A girl with a lot on the ball has a right to expect things, I suppose."

When she remained leaning against the tree, her eyes closed, the breeze blowing her hair, he dropped beside her, covered her hands. "Then why so sad about it? You enjoyed it."

She drew her hands from him: "You're cruel. I think you want to hurt me."

He winced: "That's just the very thing I don't want! That's just the core of it all. Hurt you! Why, when I sit here now and look at you—good Lord—well!"

Her eyes opened to his, startled at the sudden passion of his voice. He went on recklessly: "And I can't figure it! I can't figure how you can say you love me and yet be so carried away by the things Jake can give you."

"Stop—won't you, please! Carried away by Jake! I could stay home forever if I thought you really cared."

"I care—I love you. I've told you that. You know how it is. I can't go wild and throw everything over. Lord, I don't know what to do!"

She reached her hand to him, shutting her lips hard against a frantic, happy cry.

He went on persistent: "But is this true, Chickie—you only went out with him because you thought I didn't care? I was forcing you to it?"

She nodded.

"Chickie, please, you don't kiss Jake?"

She wouldn't meet the pleading in his voice: "Oh—I've plenty, you know. And you've wanted so few this last moon."

"I wonder who's cruel now? Chickie, can't you see things are pretty hard? If I had the money he has—Lord! do you think we'd be stalling around like this? It's just what we were talking of the other night—that in Ethan Frohm. You think it was terrible for them. What's the difference? I tell you it's terrible for us! We can't take a sleigh and dash ourselves to death down a hill. But when I sit here and watch you, that's what I'd like to do—throw everything up—"

His hands were at her shoulders, a deadly pallor in his face. She laughed softly: "Barry—really? Oh, you mean all this?"

He drew her to him: "What are we going to do, Chickie?"

"Years and years to talk, Barry. After that, years and years to love!"

He kissed her. His lips were cold. He said: "Chickie, you're beautiful to-day."

Her heart sang with its rapture. How white and glorious his face. She answered: "Every day! But if you love me so, why do you keep away? I couldn't. I wouldn't! Oh, even when I put my hand in yours! You only kissed me once."

He pushed the hair all back from her forehead. He took her face and held it in his hands, staring down at it, drawing its beauty to him.

"Do you want to make me homely pulling my hair like that?"

He laughed: "Yes! I think I'll throw vitriol in your eyes and they won't haunt me so!"

She saw an anguish in his face, sighed and closed her eyes as though a sweet, intoxicating drink were poured between her lips: "You love me, Barry. I see it now."

"I love you! Who could help it?"

"Help it? What do you mean by that? Oh—don't you want to love me?"

He wound his arms about her, stopping her fears, murmuring: "I love you!"

She answered: "And I—but I'm glad!"

CHAPTER XLIV

LOVE'S HOUR

CHICKIE sat on her golden cloud, listening to the music of Spring; the music of love, so sweet it filled her heart with tears. It sang in every pulse. Her thought sank quietly, drowned in this warm emotion. She dwelt now in the free spaces where "if" and "shall not" do not come, for here the high dream has its will.

"Barry—if we could only stay here as we are now—always."

"And have manna drop from heaven, right here—between our teeth!"

His head rested against her arm; her fingers smoothing lightly his eyebrows.

"But if we could, would you like it?"

"It's my own idea of a world as a first-class magician would have made it. Never read you the great epic of life, did I? Well, it's good! I wrote it when I was a junior at college, and I called it 'The Genesis of Morality.' Some name!"

"Explain to your stupid loveress. I take it, however, you differ with the accepted theory. You don't believe it was the biting of the apple that brought good and evil to poor Eve and all her lonely children?"

"In my world there is neither good nor evil. Only beauty. Whatever is beautiful is right."

"I'd like to live there."

"You'll have to wait a hundred centuries until we outgrow this habit of grafting consequences to our deeds, and then yanking up the deed that was in itself right and declaring it wrong. Oh, I could make you a world fit for men to live in!"

"And us poor wimmin? How should we fare?"

"On love!"

"A man's world again! I suppose we should be the sweet flowers for ye to pluck?"

"Ah—sweet to wither so! Not true, frail?"

"Yes! Most sweet if we'd wither all in a moment and vanish. But it's horrible to fade slowly with petals falling one by

one and young fresh buds coming into bloom on the very same stalk even as we die. Huh? What say to that?"

"Say it not. Never think of things like that in moments such as this!" He drew her head down, holding the delicate face and laughing into her eyes until she kissed him.

He was buoyant now—light-hearted as the night she had first met him at the beach; and as that first week when he came so gayly through the alley waiting to meet her. It made her heart a song to find him so.

He had no strained reluctance. As glad as she was . . . given up joyously to the happy hour. They loved each other. This alone mattered.

It raised Chickie above the world into this realm of stupendous music. From far off, like the pipings of grasshoppers, she heard occasionally Mary's quiet voice pleading, "Chickie, think—oh, don't take the harder things. . . ." More distant yet she heard Janina's warning, "A little love in a beautiful garden—watch it flourish; much love on the rock of poverty—it dies." The sweeping chords ran their melody over the faint echoes. She wanted it so!

She said absently: "Years aren't so long, Barry."

"No."

Looking down at the young vitality of his face with its clean hair line; the strong, sweet mouth, she said impetuously: "Indeed, Mr. Red, I think I'd rather wait seven lean years for you than marry ten kings to-morrow."

"Say that again in different words, sweet one. Pour it first into this ear and now in the other."

"How about you, Barry? Me or ten queens—which?"

"Don't tempt me, girl! Ten queens if they were all like you!"

"Would you have love enough for ten times me? I'm a great glutton, if you must know."

"Ten times ten and then some to spare."

"No!" She covered his face with her hands. "Don't look so. Here, you kiss my finger right there." She gave him her left hand, pressing the fourth finger against his lips and laughing. "Do you know what you've done, sir?"

She held out the hand: "Isn't it beautiful? So stunning that only I can see."

He watched amused: "What is it?"

"A seal on my finger. See it? Never mind. I do."

She leaned back against the tree and sighed because a bird

winged upward with such beauty to the sky; because the branches of the eucalyptus on this hill of theirs swayed in such wistful rhythm. She said absently: "Barry, do you like bungalows?"

"Why for the architecture?"

"Answer anyway!"

"Yes—next to palaces."

"I like them better if they have a garden with a white Lady Banksia climbing over an arched gateway. Wouldn't that be like a welcome to people coming to visit? Not flats like Mary's or apartments?"

"Why not an airship, fair dreamer? That will take us more swiftly."

"Are you so impatient, Barry?"

"Yes. I never could understand this waiting on the pleasure or the luck of the future when we have the present in our hands. It's reckless, I suppose, but I think this existing order is only adapted for the comfort and happiness of the old and the half dead. It's not made for us! Who was that Frenchman—Anatole France?—who said we should be born old and grow young. He had the goods!"

He talked rapidly, his hand reaching up and pulling her hair free until it stood out like a golden nimbus and the soft ends of it fell on his face. He laughed:

"I love your hair, Chickie, and your pretty eyes."

"And my fair hands and my crooked teeth?"

"I love you now—this moment." He drew the hair, winding it about his fists, forcing her down, his breath quickening.

She laughed and though it hurt and a few of the fine strands wrapped about his fingers she tossed her head back. "Let go—thee redhead loon! Hold off, unhand me!"

A dark flush swept over his cheeks, passed, leaving his face blanched. He stared at his hands and began slowly and with shaking fingers to uncurl the fine gold hairs. Presently he glanced at her—humble, fearful that he might see anger in her eyes. She said nervously and with a little high laugh:

"Shall I have my hair bobbed, sir? Then it won't get in your way."

"Make a good job of it if that's your aim, Chickie! Bob yourself out of existence."

"Would you want that, Barry?" She put her hand under his.

"No, and I won't, either." She added shyly: "Just now I have a new idea."

"What?"

But she hesitated, warned by instinct to silence. "You may not like it. Will you promise not to frown at me or say anything harsh? But first tell me this—you believe in everything new and modern, don't you?"

"Not by a long sight! Ever occur to you that you're somewhat a relic of the past? A dream of the fair women who walked the earth last century?"

"No—in my heart I'm very new! I believe in equality. I believe a girl should have a career. That's what I wanted to say, Barry. If you believed that how much easier it would be!"

"What's your secret genius, please? You've been hiding something from me. What career will you have?"

"Why—business, of course. Just where I am. You see—I could keep right on working and then—"

He sat bolt upright, lips parted, and stared at her. "Oh!" Pause that shouted between them—clamored with hurt indignation. "Oh—you mean that you'd take turns at supporting us?"

Her cheeks flamed. "Not that at all. But you see—with \$125 a month coming in sure—"

"You'd love that, wouldn't you? Just your ideal of things, isn't it? Bungalow with Lady Banksias over the arch and the young bride tripping out to work every morning because her husband doesn't earn!"

His eyes stormed at her. The soft, fairy peace of the Spring afternoon broke in pain.

"I only meant, Barry—why you see—why—then it wouldn't have to be so far away—"

He didn't answer. Her hand trembled along his arm. "I'll take it back—then. I won't say it again."

"Don't think it, either, Chickie! Never think of it again! Why did you say all that?"

He pulled her to him, tucked her hair back. His heart thumped against her, heavy and leaden. Like an arousing slap she had brought him back—forced him face to face with the hard realities before them. He wished to forget them.

CHAPTER XLV

OBSTACLES

CHICKIE'S fingers played along his palms. "Then wait it is, Mr. Red! Pish, we should worry with a tree like this and fields and birds—"

As he looked, her eyes filled, moving him to the heart. She half hid her head against him.

He could feel it now—feel her soft hands on his. Suddenly, she had raised her face trembling in its eager beauty. She had said, "Oh, Barry—I love you—all and all. And you? As much as that for me?"

He stopped now in his excited walking, sat down at his desk, all his senses leaping. Chickie's eyes were before him, warm and pretty. They glowed in his thought, brought vividly, like a hand touching him, the scenes of the day to his mind.

He saw her face, dashed with faint color, smiling above him as his head rested on her arm—saw the gold hair that he wanted so to touch—felt it now falling on his cheeks. The hot, impetuous youth in him kindled. Ah—so beautiful—he fancied her in the room, walking about delicately, going over his books, saying: "Now, what is this—and what is that? The dear Red is brilliant!"

He wished for her, fancied her coming through that arch of Lady Banksias to meet him. She would reach her hand to his neck—he would have swept his arms about Chickie then. They ached with longing. He loved her.

Now he went over the swift, glad months since that night last September when they had met—went back further to the weeks and weeks when he had stared at that bright window of hers waiting for her startled, pleased encounter with his eyes. How merry she was!

The image of her sitting at the window—a figure of poetry with seven stars in her hair, so he fancied—stirred his imagination. The reality of her, sweeter than the image, now sent its piercing appeal fiercely to his young, impatient heart.

She loved him, too. Ah—all in all—he smiled happily. Make her say that again.



A First National Picture.

"I HOPE WE'RE NOT INTRUDING," ILA PRETENDED.

"Chickie."

His thoughts drifted vaguely, losing themselves again and again in these recurring waves of feeling that swept gently like soft liquid flame about him.

In the midst of this he felt her hair as he wound it in his fists, drawing her head down. His breath labored—a shaking, hot uneasiness caught him.

Years and years— He took a bit of paper and figured idly, saying to himself, “Five years from now—” He wiped the moistness from his forehead.

For the hundredth time that night he tried to face coldly the problem before him. It seemed to him then that he loved Chickie more than anything in life. He wanted her. He wouldn’t wait five years. That much was settled.

He said to himself, railing hotly against some invisible foe: “We’ll not wait! Five years! Must be insane!”

For a long time he sat motionless, plunged in gloom. He felt himself in a pit, its walls of muffled darkness. When he struck at them they gave way silently and immediately closed again.

Now it was his earnings—now his future success—now the face of his mother—now Chickie. Each with its separate plea that came filing into his mind.

Not wait? Well—just what should he do? Throw everything overboard? Give up the law after all these years of study? Get out into something more profitable?

In days of penury, when his earnings were almost nothing, he often considered it. He wished he had studied engineering, commerce, medicine. Other fellows not much older than he could get by. Then Tufts or Lenon would throw him a case; he would handle it cleverly, throwing his entire energy into its problems. Uplifted with success, he dreamed of himself as a young Demosthenes holding a court spellbound with his eloquence; imagined the judge complimenting him for his sagacious brilliance. This resilient optimism carried him through many a month of grinding, profitless toil.

Barry Dunne was entirely confident in his own mind of his ultimate success. He would wait and work for it. It was a passion with him.

Now, as he angrily considered tossing it aside, the warm attraction of his senses gave way to a restless agitation. He began to walk again. Give up the law? He was crazy. No use ranting like a fool. Wouldn’t help them any. Must be some other way.

He knew there was not. He had no regular salary. He had months of rich luck; he had others equally impoverished. And, whether the days were lean or fat, whether he begged or borrowed, there was always the \$60 he must send to his mother. She was old now and delicate—no one but him.

Twice he had failed her—suffering agony because of her imperative need. Thinking of her now, he was thrown back again, futile, against his bonds. He felt as though thongs tightened his arms to his sides drawing hard until his breath strangled.

He fancied Chickie moving from him, her white hands outstretched and beckoning—tears in her eyes. When he didn't come, her bright head lowered.

The vision touched anew the hot sparks along his nerves. Reach her? Indeed he would! Pull her to him—tangle his hands in her hair; dip his lips in her tears—so beautiful she was. Let her go? Why—

He had all of youth's scornful fury for the hands that stay his will; for the prim, sorry "don'ts" that the wise and the old hiss into the ears of the new. Feeling these restraints bitterly now, he could have flung them off with arrogant contempt.

"Wait!" Well, let the cold and the spent accept the mandate! His imagination—always more that of the poet than the lawyer—created a different world where beauty was the first law; a glowing world of young fire and passion; no laurels given those who walk severely because of their emotional poverty—a world of to-day with no to-morrow to thrust its consequences in the face of joy.

His senses clamoring against his thought could not accept the beauty of denial any more than his young pulses could perceive a sublimity in death. Denial and death—they were the same. They spoke no music that the heart of twenty-four could hear.

To Barry now, one thing was paramount. He and Chickie loved each other. This was the rightest thing in the world. It was theirs. But they couldn't take it. They must put it off—into the far future. It seemed both vicious and cruel.

Now—after three hours of wakefulness he was back in the hot throb where he had begun. Nothing solved. They would go on as before—they must.

Through his open window the night air blew soft and clear; faint warmth of Spring in its touch. He paused, pushing the paper now covered with scrolls from him. Go on as before—

long, dreamy Sundays under a tree, Chickie's fingers smoothing his eyebrows. He said half aloud, flushing: "Yes! Like that for five or six years!"

Suddenly he saw Chickie's face, white, pathetic, her eyes closed when he taunted her; when he blamed her so hotly for her interest in Jake.

He remembered that she said: "Jake's so kind. I can't stay home all the time, can I?"

He insisted that if she loved him she would not wish to go out with Jake.

She answered promptly: "I'd stay home forever if I thought you really cared."

And he demanded this. Now it made him burn with discomfort. He asked her to give up these years entirely to him. And he had nothing to offer in exchange for her sacrifice. Had a fellow a right to do this? Had he the right to keep her from enjoyments that he could never furnish?

Perhaps he should leave her free. Better all around. Nights when he had to work she shouldn't be kept lonely at home. Let Jake entertain her—

His thought reared fiercely. She was willing! She said so. Why should she go out with Jake? What was his interest? Plenty of money! Stalling around! She'd not go out with him!

He thought with the mightiness of youth: "She doesn't care. She wants to do it. I can make it up to her."

But he had no idea how this was going to be nor when.

CHAPTER XLVI

RISING TIDE

"MAKES it very agreeable that I can talk to myself! Only the third time I've spoken!" Mary Blake, sitting opposite at the lunch table, watched Chickie with shrewd, curious eyes. Seeing her deep in a dream, her pulse quickened.

Chickie brought back with a jerk from a vital, laughing face lowered to hers; from green slopes and birds winging upward joyously, stammered: "Lewis called Stella Wilson this morning. She got the high strungs—poor thing—and had to go home. It got us all on edge. I was thinking of that."

"Yes, you were! With that idiotic smile on your face! Remember, ole thing, it's your lifelong twin you're trying to kid and you don't get away with it. I asked you—" Mary broke off suddenly, her mouth opening in surprise: "Whew! Wherever in the world did that come from, Chickie?"

Mary reached over and touched the pin in Chickie's dress—Jake's sapphires. "This—heavens!"

"Oh—that? Why, I didn't know I had it on. Spiffy, isn't it—got it at the novelty shop."

Mary turned it slowly and more slowly glanced at Chickie. "You did!" And she kept looking and smiling until Chickie's face burned scarlet.

"Yes—like it?"

"Rather! And to think you'd keep this from me and you know I've been on my knees for the last six months praying you'd have sense enough. Chickie—when? You love him? I can see it! Oh—"

Chickie's hands flew nervously to her breast, covering the beautiful pin. She would have liked to snatch it off, drop it on the floor. She said quietly, knowing Mary wouldn't be bluffed: "Jake gave me this months ago. I gave it back and he forced it on me. It means nothing. I didn't even know I had it on. It's been in this dress for weeks."

"Don't explain, ole darling! This is good enough! You're going to marry Jake?"

"No! Well—no! Don't be so ridiculous!"

"But a gift like this! Why, it must have cost hundreds and hundreds. The man must be wild about you."

"Oh, my, yes. You remember he gave a bar pin to Amy Heaton!"

Mary paled. "Not putting yourself in Amy Heaton's class, are you? You surely wouldn't keep a pin like that unless you cared for him!"

"I like him, of course. He's fine in lots of ways. I tell you I gave the pin back and he made me keep it. Stop staring at me!"

"I'll stare if I like! What are you so excited about? For pity sakes!"

Chickie's eyes suddenly brimmed. She took out her handkerchief and pretended to sneeze. With the quick, impulsive way that was like Jimmy, Mary whispered breathless: "Well, of all things! What have I stepped on? I didn't mean it. Something you don't want me to know?"

Chickie, amazed at her sudden uncontrol, kept her head lowered: "I don't know why you were so determined to marry me to Jake. He's never asked me. And I don't want him to. I don't love him."

Mary's dark, penetrating eyes filled with sadness: "Oh—so that's it. You love that Barry Dunne. You, too, Chickie!"

Chickie's heart shook: "Love meant everything to you a little while ago, Mary."

A pause—then a slow: "Y-e-s."

"Why don't you want me to have it?"

Mary kept silent. Chickie went on, voice humming with a rising feeling. "Why, you said you'd wait a thousand years for love and it was worth it. You said it paid for any agony. You told me that after the baby was born. Now you've changed!"

"No, I haven't changed. I would never give up the love for money or anything else. But you have a chance for both. That's all. You could have made your life glorious. I know you, Chickie. Months ago you were thrilled and more than half in love with Jake Munson!"

"Half in love! There's no such thing! Mary—for you to say a lie like that!"

"Then it's settled, Chickie? You can answer, can't you? Will you be married soon?"

"No—nothing is settled. Mary—don't go saying things. It will be five or six years."

"Not a regular engagement, then?" Mary's face brightened. "You'll still keep your eyes on Jake? Much can happen in five or six years, you know."

The white, pained supplication in Chickie's eyes warned Mary. She saw with a pang their quivering, vivid emotion. She said anxiously: "You don't mean to cut out every one else, do you? What are you looking so frightened about? Don't tell me you're going to wait five or six years and ditch every one else in the meantime!"

"I'm not telling you anything. I suppose you wouldn't have waited for Edward?"

"Never you mind about me! And it's fine to love. That's all right. If you still love him in five years and he hasn't a cent I'll be the first one to shout: 'Take him!' But give yourself a chance. What guarantee have you that he'll still care in five or six years?"

"As much as you or any one has. Marriage doesn't make it certain these days."

"No—it doesn't. And marriage is time enough for a girl to begin her sacrifices. You'll have all the chance you want! I'm not regretting one thing I have to do. But just the same, I'd not give any man a five years' handicap. That's what you're doing. What's the need of it? What's the sense of it?"

Chickie laughed: "Inevitable! Your very own word, Mary, ole thing! I wouldn't give it up for all the Jakes that were ever born since the very beginning of time!"

"You mean to turn him down completely?"

"Yes—there's nothing else to do."

She said this serenely—swiftly—for now her whole life shimmered out in a beautiful clarity. It was Monday morning. She rode, uplifted on the crest of the mighty wave that had yesterday swept the two of them so buoyantly together. In her mind was an aching joy—the memory of Barry's face, pale with anguish, the look in his eyes when he said, "I love you—who could help it!" It filled her heart now with a sweet, wild intoxication.

Ah, nothing Mary or any one in all the world might say could alter that. She would hold fast to it a lifetime.

Mary got up heavily from the table. "Don't think I'm a kill-joy, Chickie. You know what I'd do for you, I guess. Maybe I'm all wrong, but I think this is blind in you—terribly blind."

"Glad to be blind, ole dear! Eyes were never so sweet as this!"

Walking down Montgomery Street, wondering where he had eaten; if he was looking for her; if he would wait at the corner, her arm was suddenly caught, an excited: "Where have you been!" darted against her ear.

She looked startled into Barry's flushed, demanding eyes and laughed uneasily: "What do you mean! Accost me like this!"

"I've been waiting an hour! Fine thing—right off the bat. If that's your idea of things—"

"What are you ranting about? You knew I had this date with Mary. I told you—"

A sheepish grin touched up the corners of his mouth. He was immediately red to his ears—laughing. "Beg pardon, frail! Listen—stay downtown to-night. We'll have an early dinner. I'll drive you home. Have to work later. How's that? Ah—you pretty thing—come to the window and throw me the sweet eye, will you?"

If he had given her wings, she would not have gone more lightly back to work. She took off her hat, hiding her face in it. She said to herself: "Oh, well—" and drew a deep sigh, trembling.

All morning a small fear gnawed at her joy . . . fear even to meet. He might take back all he said—might be gloomy, again—reluctant. Might begin to fight against it. But he was all blithe. She was at peace.

When they were sitting in a little booth in the restaurant, she laughed for no cause at all. She said: "Barry—you seem quite in a tickle this pleasant evening."

"Why not—and the fair one fairer than ever. Things will come out—we'll get around it somehow—eh?"

He talked bonnily—made a killing in the morning—celebrate—go to a big show Saturday. He clinked his pocket and emptied out a handful of quarters, nickels and dimes. "There's meals for a week, girl! Ever get down to your last quarter? I'll take you there! Great sensation!"

They dallied over the meal—talking of nothing—laughing. They sneaked in a quick ride to the beach.

She said: "Barry, you didn't want to love me, did you?"

"But I do!"

"You fought against it! Why?"

"That's past! I'm conquered! Kiss me, frail—there—here. I hate to take you back so soon."

"Must you?"

"Well—well—"

"Yes—don't dare to weaken! And then blame me!"

Her eyes were moist and brilliant. They walked slowly up the steps of the cottage. They stood whispering a moment. She waited till he sped away, then she opened the door softly. Some one came into the hall—took her hand.

"This is how you keep your date, my dear? Well, there's some of it left, anyway! Hurry!"

It was Jake. She had completely forgotten.

CHAPTER XLVII

JAKE'S FAREWELL

JAKE'S eyes passed with amused tolerance over her glowing, excited face, filling her with irritation. She said abruptly: "I didn't expect you! There was nothing definite."

Through the door of the living-room, Jennie watched Jonathan tugging at his mustache. The complacent monotony, so drab, so tame, struck her with sudden aversion. She wanted to dash away—close them out! What did they know of lightning in the blood? Ah—what did they know of songs flashing through the heart? Even Jake—

He laughed, whispering softly: "You little liar! It was as definite as Monday coming after Sunday. And a good show, too! Come as you are!"

"It's too late. I'm tired; really. It would be over when we got there."

Jennie padded out, rubbing her hands. "Yes—hurry! This is no way to do. Mr. Munson has been waiting an hour."

She said flippantly: "Oh, let him wait! What his interest! I had to work. I'm too tired now."

Jake shrugged, his eyes mocking. "Take a ride, then; rest yourself, my dear. Give you the sea breeze."

And Jennie nodding, mildly reproving. Just when she wanted most to be free—to be alone—to go sweeping her thoughts far out with him on the tossing, glad sea that was love.

She put out her hand in swift appeal. Jake turned toward her, shutting Jennie out. "Chickie—you've got to say good-by to me, anyway! Won't turn me out stark cold, will you? Not polite, my dear! I'll bring you back in half an hour."

She went.

It left her with a little poisoned fear in her mind—that meeting with Jake. He said nothing until they were parked on a lonely stretch between the trees below the Buffalo paddock. He slumped down in the seat and laughed: "Giving me the out, Chickie?"

She didn't answer, but, half glancing toward him, noticed the red mouth pale and unsmiling. His warm, magnetic hand cov-

ered hers. "I see, Chickie. You won't listen to an old dog, will you? Don't want me around at all?"

"I'm not making dates with any one."

"As bad as that? You're calling off Wednesday and Friday, too?"

"Yes."

"Forever, I suppose?"

"Yes."

He leaned down to her then, black eyes hot, provoking. "Well, say it gently—draw tears, you little onion! Say it without so much as a sigh. That's affectionate, my dear!" His breath quickened, his face so near to hers she could feel it like a flame. The exultant voice sank to a husky murmur. "Chickie, you don't mean this? Let me speak—"

She put her hands up between them. He caught them, moving his hot lips swiftly over their palms. "I will—I want you, Chickie. I love you; oh, I'd give the world. I've not said much lately. I wanted you to care. Chickie—if you'd only put your arms around me—just once—"

She closed her eyes, pushing him with a little sob. "No! Don't! Oh, I can't stand it!"

He sat back rigid—white as paper. He began to fumble with the gears; his breath so loud it seemed tearing him. She was cut to the heart; tears rushed into her eyes. She hid her face.

"Never mind, Chickie." He touched her hands gently. "That's all right. I shouldn't have done that. I couldn't help it. The way you look I thought you liked me a little."

"I do! I like you a great deal. Oh, I think you're fine. I wouldn't hurt you for the world. But you see—well—I didn't think you'd say that now—"

"No. I didn't mean to. If you knew how I want you—how I'd like to kiss you—how I've wanted for all these months—and a year before that. Chickie—my dear—" He clenched his hands on the wheel. After a while he said quietly: "You're not going to be married?"

"Oh, I don't think of such things."

He smiled. "That's good—a boy's love. Swift and hot. I think I want you enough to wait—Chickie—wait till you come back. Will you be glad to find me here then? You rather like me. Yes, you do! You've let me kiss you! I'll wait!"

She couldn't speak for the faint heat that rose heavily above her. She felt a knife striking white through her heart. Boy's

love—swift and hot. Oh, was that true of Barry? And she might some day look across the alley and find no sweet, strong mouth pursed gayly, teasing, to hers? Oh—and a day when he would be gone? A numb, faint terror pulsed coldly through her veins.

She lay awake that night and through the soft beauty of her dream there ran a hard, tight thread of fear. She felt Barry's fine hands holding her face, his lips trembling when he said how beautiful she was. She felt his head lowering to hers, warm, firm cheeks pressed against her neck.

Oh—she would wind her arms relentlessly about him—oh, she would bind him fast—she would drop on her knees and plead. Never again would he go. He was hers—always.

She looked neither back to the days when she painted for herself such a rich, magnificent future—Princess Chickie garmented in furs, riding in limousines, sailing to Europe; nor forward to the time when she would be grimly called upon to skimp, to suffer, to sacrifice. Her heart and all her thought dwelt in this golden ecstasy of the present. Only to keep it so—and always.

She awakened in the middle of the night; found herself sitting upright, trembling—a starkness in her mind. She had dreamed that she and Jake were standing on a gray shore. It was raining—a cruel wind blowing. Jake said: "Well, I told you, my dear—a boy—" She lay back shivering, half crying.

Wild with torment to see Barry again; to hear him laugh warmly, looking into her eyes, saying: "Ah—the pretty one—how I love her!" Aching to have his glance going down like a silver light to bless her heart.

It was quite a while before she spoke of it to him. Often now as they rode in the evenings she stole a glance to his wonderfully set head. A little faint terror throbbed through her because it swept her so—just watching him. Sometimes she reached her hand to his neck, touching his cheek, whispering: "Barry, I'm dying all for love. And you?"

"And you do that again, frail—heaven knows what will happen."

They had paused at the crest of Twin Peaks; blue sky all [a-patterned with star dust, arching down gently to the still, far-circling beauty of the thousand purple hills.

In the swinging valleys, the quiet homes wearing lights like pale yellow jewels.

She said softly, ready either to sing or to cry: "Barry—it seems as though we're at the top of the world all alone. And I love it! It seems that I don't need or want a thing but you. A little while ago if any one told me I would be willing to stand the hard things—and, oh—just want to stand them, I would have jeered. I would have run from that window of yours yelling blue murder!"

His mouth, full cut and sweet, came down to hers: "You really love me that much, Chickie? Why? Say it again."

"Then are you glad? But did you want it to turn out like this?"

Looking into her eyes, he shook his head: "No, ma'am! Or I would have hitched up my belt and run like the devil!"

"Oh, you would!"

He was suddenly remembering the idle September afternoon when he had stood at the window flirting. How aimless and happy all his fancies. Just a pretty face above him—just a bright dash of color tossed into the day's work. Of course, he hadn't planned on this.

Chickie repeated: "You would have run—oh, why?"

He said, grinning but honest: "Well, you've answered it yourself. Who craves hardship or struggle? And I, a penniless youth riled with ambition! Why, when you first began to flirt with me—oh, all right, then, when I first gave you the merry eye, I thought it would be sweet to love you in a nice, summery way, such a lily-face as it was perched there above me—"

Her eyes saddened and lowered; her white hands lay clasped in her lap. The sweetness of her went through his senses subtly like faint, lulling music. He took her hands and pressed them: "Chickie—that was long ago—beforehand, as it were. Now—well, now, I only think of you and how dear you are—"

"And you want it to stay like this—and stay—"

"Yes—now don't think of gloomy things. We don't have to. Don't begin bringing a terrible future down on our innocent heads. Ah—Chickie—look up—catch it as it falls!"

She clung to him—glad tears against his heart.

He came one evening a few weeks later with a great package that he held by a wooden handle. He hunched his head down against his shoulders, red, grinning: "Got something—Chickie—listen, here's a present—me to you—and say—news! Remember that Ila Moore you met at the Abbots'? Father has all kinds of jack—"

Chickie broke in, breathless—a sharpness in her throat: “Yes! What about her!”

“Saw her father to-day—may get a big chance.”

“With him? With Ila’s father?” She drew her hands together.

“Through him.”

“You’ll take it?”

“Well, will I!” He thrust the enormous package into her hands. “Take it, frail. Say—if we get this, we’ll be sitting pretty. You an’ yer steady!” He stooped and kissed her.

“Pretty good, sweet?”

A pause—and then she answered.

CHAPTER XLVIII

BRIGHTENING ROAD

"DID Ila get this chance for you?" A little smile curved at her lips, but her breath caught sharply. Almost with pain she watched his face.

"No—her father. Here, look out for that. It's wobbly—water inside. Say, woman, don't you show any interest in your lover's gift? Good one, too."

He took out his penknife and snipped the cords on the great clumsy bundle. Kneeling on the floor, he looked up to her: "Guess what it is. Ah—you're too slow! It'll be no more if I don't give it the air!"

Snickering, his face red, he pulled off the loose paper from a tall glass aquarium. Within, motionless as though carved in black stone, were two funny little water dogs and a long branch of green seaweed.

Chickie burst out laughing: "Of all the cuckoos! What in heaven's name makes you bring these slimy foundlings to my door?"

"Ain't they cute? I thought the capricious one would like them."

She knelt down beside him, watching the still creatures, fascinated by their immobility. "They must be dead."

"No, they've 'jest et' and they're sleeping."

"Standing up like that on their tails?"

He stirred the water with a pencil; they wiggled. "Ila had a jar of them in the sun room. Seems they're all the rage. That gave me the hunch."

"Oh!" She wished to toss off carelessly, "Oh, you've been visiting Ila?" But her throat tightened. She repeated faintly: "Oh—"

He winked. "Yes—oh! And, oh, again! Too proud to ask when and how?"

"Tish! The door is always open. Go, when you will!"

"Ah—the fair one is jealous! She won't ask, 'How come?' "

He reached down for her hand, pulled her to her feet. But

it's goody for us. We may get a real job out of it. I may marry the girl, yet! I mean you, frail. Will ye have me, and I can put a crust of bread in your mouth?"

"With butter?"

"And sugar and jam! But not a damn word will you hear till you ask—till you say 'Please!' No, that's not enough. Say 'My darling Red, please tell me.' Say it."

So she did.

"Well, Ila's old man owns the Gulf Steamship Company. They have a regular staff of attorneys in New York. They want a fellow here—not much responsibility yet. But I may land it. Tufts and Lennon are pulling the strings."

"But how did they come to think of you? Did Ila mention it to her father?"

He jabbed his elbow against her arm. "Not prickly at all, are we? It happened thusly: Going on four years ago, when I was young and innocent and just out of college, Moore had a case that Tufts and Lennon handled. They let me look up a few records. I met Moore. One day he gave me a lift to the ferry. Ila happened to be in the car at the time. We was acquainted and the lady was charmed with me. And, after this and that, she invited me to their country place at Tahoe. Now you have the dark chapter in my life."

"And you had a regular kid case, did you?"

"Nope! Here sits my first and only genuine all-wool love!"

"Really, Barry? You mean that? But you haven't said a word about the job."

"Oh! We're ready to hear that now, are we? Other little matter all cleared up? Well—Moore came to Tufts and asked if he could recommend some clever young fellow, like me, just to look after their interests here. Does not amount to a great deal now, but growing. If I get it it will mean \$150, maybe \$200 a month, besides what I pick up on my own. Could we get by on that?"

She turned her face against him; in excess of gladness tears flew to her eyes, laughter to her lips: "On much less than that! I may take this for a bona fide proposal, sir? So sudden like!"

"It's a bona fide dream all right. If it goes through there's nothing to it." He hesitated. "Of course, there's nothing very definite yet. I have to go up there to-morrow night. To Moores'. They asked me for dinner and there'll be a conference afterward. Tufts, too. Is that all right?"

She pinched the tips of her fingers to points. She didn't answer.

"So, sweet one, it wasn't all right for you and Jake? Is that what you're thinking?"

She laughed: "Maybe!"

"First time I ever knew the sun to be afraid of the yolk of an egg as a rival!"

"Ah—she's a great deal shinier than the yolks of a thousand eggs!"

"And you don't want me to look at her? Or be blinded by her? I'm blind now. I don't see her at all."

"All right, then, you go—but don't look at her too hard!"

It was a little pointed claw digging at her happiness. She remembered piercingly the vision of Ila Moore, lovely and serene, like those pictures of St. Cecilia; remembered her standing at the bureau, lips parted, a radiant flush spreading over her cheeks when Barry came into the room, when he stopped abruptly, greeting her.

She remembered, too, that Ila was still awake when she came back from the pool, Barry's kisses warm on her lips; her heart gone out of her and all to him. Ila had wished to talk of him; she knew that; she had evaded.

Now she kept going over this—recalling each word. She thought, grudgingly: "He doesn't need to go for dinner. I should think they'd have conferences in the afternoon."

With each new twist her uneasiness mounted. Suddenly she was ashamed and laughed. How—if she couldn't hold him against Ila Moore—against all the world—well! Well—better know it then! Leave the door open—let him go.

Sitting before her small, white bureau and looking at herself, golden hair falling, the small pointed chin trembled. Let him go—oh—

But as she fell asleep there came to her gently like a bright ray of sun the memory of him as he said in low, eager vibrance: "You two look alike? Let me see. Open your pretty eyes—ah!" And his hands at her shoulders had crossed down about her waist, drawn her to him. They looked with startled joy into each other's eyes. That night he told her how he loved her. And he said it again to-night. Said more—said with such boyish gayety: "Can we get by on that? I and the fair one!" So this was enough!

Yet she was intensely curious about that dinner. She stayed

at home reading idly through books of poetry he had given her. They were at dinner now. Was Ila sitting next him? What did she wear—some soft green thing that would make her an angel? And would they have time to talk afterward? She would lead him into the sun room—show him her pets—ugly little water dogs. They gave Chickie the creeps.

Wildie came with tufted feet and spread himself on the floor, stretching his long head in her lap, blinking and gazing at her. She held his long nose in both her hands: "Good old Wildie! Love me! Love your pretty lady? Well, do! Who knows—I may need it."

But at lunch he told her all about it. Not much of a conference. Might be weeks before it was all settled.

She said with a merry laugh: "Did Ila whisper sweet things in your ear?"

"She did! The frails always do—the dear things!"

"What, for instance?"

"She's now at the stage where she has a grand passion for Nietzsche—super-stuff, you know! We talked of that and Plato and shall children be reared by doting parents or by the state. Such tender converse as that, we had!"

"Nothing else?"

"Well, she asked of you."

"Oh—of course I knew it. I suppose she said in a very distant tone: 'How is that pretty thing—Miss—what was her name—you know, your friend at the house party?'"

Barry burst out laughing: "Oh—you cats! How you know each other!"

"Is that what she said?"

"'Tis! And, sez I, 'Tis the dream of me life—me steady, ye speak of, Miss Moore? Well—she's prettier than that and her name is darling angel!'"

"You did not!"

"All right! I'm a liar, then. But I think the thing is going through—"

"And then?" Her face overspread with scarlet—even her eyes mantling with shy joy. "And then, Barry?"

He kissed her. "We'll elope—thee and me!"

CHAPTER XLIX

ANTICIPATION

CHICKIE took the noon hour to shop. Trembling, yet half enchanted, she stood at the counter running her hand through a delicate pink cloud of silk and lace—lingerie, the sheerest and most expensive offered for half price in this early May sale.

When Chickie read the ad she thought with a gay flush: "I may as well begin to gather things, gradually—that's the best way. It may be real soon."

Now she examined a beautiful set with little plaits and insets of hand embroidered net. Even at half price it was \$25. She wanted it. She had nothing as lovely as that. Pulses tingled at her ears. She said to herself: "Bridal set—it will be the best one. I might as well—"

But she hesitated and might have walked out, but an abrupt, nosey woman picked it from her hand, saying to the saleswoman: "Another set like this? If you have, I'll take it." And she remained at Chickie's side waiting her decision. Chickie took it.

She had it done in a box—tissue paper. Tremulous with excitement, as though her wedding day were the morrow, she went airily back to work. The purchase engrossed her thought. "Frightful extravagance! What in the world would Jennie say? Jennie mustn't know. Hide it." She began to wonder if it was worth the money, and became so troubled about it that she took the box and stole to the dressing-room for a swift scrutiny. It was more exquisite than she fancied.

That night she laid it out in her drawer and put little pink and blue sachet bags about it. She was just covering it carefully when the door was opened. She faced about, guilty. It was only Jonathan.

He came in his big, clumsy way, closing the door mysteriously. She laughed: "Cutie comes on a secret mission? Got some dark plot afoot?"

He stood at the bureau running his knuckles back and forth

over the scarf. "Chickie, did you and Mr. Munson quarrel?"

"Oh—you goofy old Jonathan, of course not!"

"Was he angry with you about that night you kept him waiting?"

"Well, hear that! Don't you know, Johnny, darling, I'm the girl what kicks the crowns from the heads of kings and laughs about it? Angry with me!"

"Why doesn't he come any more?"

"Shall I arsk him? Shall I demand to know why he's forsaken your beautiful darter? Men you know and the weather like a change—sometimes fair and sometimes dark."

He took her shoulders and made her face him. "Chickie girl, that's not true. Now, he did a great deal for us and I wouldn't like to feel that you'd been rude to him. Your mother and I thought he had very serious intentions."

"Oh, you did, did you." She became nervous, laughing a little high-pitched gayety. "Well, imagine little Jennie getting such notions. That's not demure. When I was a girl we wouldn't dream of such a thing until the man had flopped to his knees and said his little piece!"

He looked down at her, nodding—sober. "You don't want your father to know, Chickie? Is this the way you want to treat me?"

She dropped her eyes before the consuming, kind love of his: "You make it pretty hard for me, Jonathan. I can't help it if he doesn't come, can I? Men do things like this."

"Did he never speak for you?"

"If you mean did he ask me to marry him—well, he didn't."

"Because you let him see that you preferred this boy? Was that the reason, Chickie? You drove right up here that night when you knew he was waiting. I was ashamed of that."

"Oh, I didn't know it. Now, don't start in that—that's just like you, Jonathan—you want me to cry about it. If he wants to come, he can; if he stays away—tish, I should worry!"

He knew that she wished him to go; he saw her lips with little eager movements twisting them. He put his arm about her shoulders, raised her chin upward: "Chickie, girl—what can Barry do for you? He's a nice boy, but your old dad right now can make things sweeter. If you're tired of working—why don't you stay home awhile? Your mother spoke of it. She's not as young as she was. Fine to have our Chickie around all day."

"I'm not tired—at all—I like to work. I have lots of fun at it. What are you getting so solemn about? Don't you want me to have any friends?"

Jonathan only new that this sweet, fairy thing with her bright head against his shoulder was his life; only knew that he could beat the path smoother for her with his bare hands. And he saw—or thought he saw—that she was running into a road of thorns and jagged stones. He said heavily: "I want you to be wise, Chickie. You've never had to do without. You've always had it pleasant and easy. Have you ever thought of that?"

She twined his mustache in her fingers, kissing his rough cheeks. "Don't worry, Cutie! Little lamb is safe! Going to stick right here with Jonathan many a long, long day."

"You're telling me the truth, Chickie?"

"Who knows, Jonathan? What is truth?"

She thought when he finally left—thought with a little sad bitterness: "He doesn't want me to love either. He and Jennie married because they wanted each other. And Mary did that. And Lucy. Now they shriek at me, 'Don't!'" She wondered with uncertain, wistful eagerness, if they could possibly be right.

It was like the reluctance she had noticed in Barry. But that was gone now. When he came to the window he was all daring and happy. When he met her for lunch he often touched her hand quickly, made her look up, pursing his lips to tease her. When they rode about the city at night, parking at the beach, or the Marina, he grabbed her and put her head on his shoulder—made her stay like that. She did—her thoughts drifting in a beautiful languor, losing themselves in the high tide of love.

One Sunday morning they hired horses and went riding. Chickie borrowed Janina's suit. She had a magnificent sensation of wealth—fancied herself a gay young débutante and Barry a lord millionaire. They were both jubilant, thrilled with a sense of adventure.

They took the bridle path through the trees above the Chain of Lakes. Pond lilies, white, glimmering, pearled the waters. He rode a little behind, coming up suddenly, the flanks of their horses touching. He dropped a sprig of yellow broom to her. "You look like a lady of King Arthur's court—so sweet she is!"

He put his hand on hers, holding the reins. He whispered softly: "Chickie!"

She glanced up slowly, knowing that he was bending to her. A flush tinged in his eyes. He said breathlessly: "Quick!" She stood a little in the stirrups—waited till he kissed her twice. She lowered her head, flushed and silent—seeing the ardent youngness in his face. And she felt within her a thing that bowed down gladly—that laughed and sank to its knees.

No matter—no matter—ah, let Jonathan talk and Mary warn—there was one thing on the earth—that look in his eyes—that clasp of his hands.

Still he rode alongside of her; still he held the reins. He said with his lips shaking: "Chickie—I wish it was to-day!"

She twined her fingers under his, pressed them hard. She said only: "Oh."

"Do you? Chickie, look up—oh, why—"

She met his glance bravely, smiled: "Yes—I do!"

His face grew pale.

It only made her heart light; made her thoughts sing—that swift, white look of suffering. Jimmy had looked at her like that. It made him hers.

No day passed now that they didn't see each other. At noon she stood at her window, looking across to his. If he put his hand up it meant they were to meet at the corner. If he turned both thumbs down it meant that he couldn't get away—that something kept him too late.

The Wednesday after their ride the thumbs were down. Well—that meant a long, sweet evening together—

Chickie went to lunch with Janina.

"Getting in deeper and deeper—up to your neck?" Janina asked.

"Oh, I don't know about that."

"She could have a king and the poor babe in the woods takes the page!"

"You like them young yourself, Janina."

"That's where you're wrong. It's the callow youths that fall for me. Give me a chance at a man with blood in his veins and you won't see me crying for milk! Bess is coming to meet us."

They were just seated when Bess, all drooping, but extremely chic, let herself down with a long sigh next to Chickie: "Water—I've just dragged in here to draw my last breath."

Order my coffin, Janka, love. Have it made of ivory to remind the world that I died pure. Oh, Miss Bryce, how dare you look so rosy—don't you know I suffer from other people's robust health! How's your steady? Is Ila Moore trying to win him away from you? Saw his picture on her dressing table. Don't worry, little one—you've got her dead to rights. Men don't like the tranquil type."

It was a blow sharp in Chickie's face. She shrank from it. Coming back to the office, she walked quickly past his building. And she saw him. She saw a limousine with a man and a girl at the curb. Barry was stepping into it. The girl was Ila Moore.

CHAPTER L

PROMISE

At two o'clock Barry Dunne stood at his window. And Chickie knew that he was there. She went on with her typing.

From the corner of her eye she saw him lean out, resting on his hands. She got up and moved into the shadow, opening the drawers of the filing cabinet. She didn't wish to look at him.

Yet his gray eyes moved before her, smiling. His hand clasped hers. She felt him bending down to her, holding her spirit mute. Tears ran scalding to her throat—turn his thumbs down to her—and afterward—

She glanced swiftly to Janina's desk and, sure that she was unnoticed, stole to the dressing-room. She pressed her face against the cold marble of the walls—pressed her hands against her, and she would cling to him, would whisper warmly . . .

She saw him stepping into the machine. Ila Moore radiant as she greeted him. She grew chill with a sick, deadly fear.

No use to think. She couldn't think. She could only feel, and now even her emotions were passing into a cruel numbness.

Then she fancied him coming to her, putting his arms about her, and she would cling to him, would whisper warmly . . .

She sat on the window-sill, closing her eyes. No! She wouldn't do that! Oh, no! Why—why—if he preferred lunch with Ila—oh—let him— She looked down to the roof of the adjoining building, wondering aimlessly how far it was. Her whole body trembled.

That dream of herself standing on a gray, wind-blown shore returned. She worked all afternoon with this feeling of empty desolation closing on her.

Ila Moore had his picture on her dressing table. Her thought broke into Ila's room, snatched the picture—claiming it with a cold, young fury.

But at five o'clock she turned her back on the alley, hurrying out with Stella Wilson, choosing Montgomery Street, because he would not look for her there.

He could go. She said this to herself in a bleak litany all the way home on the street car. By the time she reached her door she had so terrified herself that he might, indeed, do this thing, she was spent and a little frantic.

She had an idea that she would go down to Mary's—go to a movie—take a walk. But she waited in the living-room, starting nervously when Jennie asked mildly what had happened during the day, bounding from her chair when a machine honked at the corner.

When, finally, he was at the door, red hair brushed back, eyes shiny with such a boy's eagerness, she was unable to meet his look, unable to speak. She leaned against the wall, letting her hand rest nerveless in his.

But he said, unaware: "Melancholic to-night? Why for? Ran off and left me? Waited for you. Here, more presents. Ain't I good to you?"

Already there melted through her a soft, happy relief, a brimming gratitude, just that he was here. Oh, let him have lunch wherever he pleased! Let Ila Moore smile at him! Only that he returned—only that he came back, held her hand, laughing down at her.

He thrust the package in her hand—another book. She glanced at the title: "Thus Spake Zarathustra." Oh—Nietzsche—Ila had a grand passion for him. With a shrill apprehension she wondered. "Is he comparing me to her! A brilliant person like that!"

She said feebly: "You bring me philosophers, Mr. Red? And I a poor, untutored idiot!"

"I'd like to bet that you'll get more out of it than these pedantic dames."

She laughed merrily: "Meaning Ila?"

"Meaning any one you please but a sweet, untutored idiot!"

"Oh—come in then, and let my great intellect wander through the pages."

"Not by a long sight. Get your clothes and step. We'll darnce to-night."

"Something blessed happen?"

"May hap! On your way."

Like that, gayety returned—rushed in silver waters over her. Pooh! Pedantic dames. But they—the two of them—would dance. And he was always buoyant—full of rhythm then.

They went to the St. Francis. Stepping into the lights, the

glow of music and color, Chickie felt as always, an intensified brightness in her mind—a sharpening all along her nerves. As though a great, golden ball of joy opened like a sun and she was caught into the midst of it. More stimulating than wine. Snatches of song hummed to her lips. With a flip of her hand she could toss her heart out gayly in a burst of laughter.

Other girls dancing—gazing with half-closed eyes at their partners, swaying with a seeming, innocent abandon in the slow, throbbing measures, fascinated her. She compared her dress now to that clingy Persian thing, now to the striking black. All of them—herself included—were creatures of another world, endowed for this one night with a brilliant, mysterious charm.

She watched them, wondering if she looked graceless on the floor; if her face took on a vacant, guileless stare like that slim brown girl with her cheek so serenely against her partner's.

Barry tapped the table: "Here, frail, am I to be ignored all evening as I was all afternoon? Come through now—why did you give me the back of your hand; the back of your head all afternoon?"

"Busy, sir. Very busy."

"And she's not interested enough to ask where I was at lunch?"

"Does he wish to tell me?"

"He do! It may be his future and hers at stake." He told her that Tufts had made an appointment with Moore because Moore might soon be returning to New York and he wished to get everything straightened out before then. He made no mention of Ila.

Chickie asked, her voice trailing: "Just the three of you went to lunch?"

The tone caught him. Glancing swiftly, he saw the pleading anxiety in her dark, beautiful eyes.

"Well—you miserable little piker. So that's it? And I'm treated with scorn all afternoon. I'm left waiting at the church when five o'clock rolls around. Proud, isn't she? Oh, she won't ask any questions? She'll pass judgment. Like that! So you saw us, did you?"

It hurt to be trapped so. Blood flew in a pained red to her face, her eyes brimmed. "Yes, I saw you."

"Mean, contemptible way to pass it up! You think that's fair and noble, I suppose? It's not! She merely happened to

be at her father's office and he was driving her to the Palace. He dropped her there. You believe me, don't you?"

She kept her head lowered, smiling. "Of course, I do! But, then—you're thumbs down to me—oh, you can see—"

"Yes, frail! And perhaps you can understand how I felt on a similar occasion, only yours was calculated. You went with him on purpose!"

Seeing the unsteady glimmer in her eyes, he got up quickly, swept her into the dance, drawing her so close she felt his heart thumping. He whispered softly: "Don't have tears in your pretty eyes! Lordee, these wimmin!"

Finally she managed to say, "Did you get anything settled?"

"Not so much. These selfish hogs don't seem to realize that two of the young and beautiful are hanging by their teeth waiting while they decide whether or not they may have each other. Sardonic, isn't it? Our rights should depend on their pleasures! Any time in the next fifty-five years is soon enough for them."

"And for you, Barry?"

"It will suit me better if they make it in twenty. That'll give us a year or two ahead of the grave. What if we're limping a little—as it may be."

"Twenty is too long for me."

"You won't wait for me that long, Chickie?"

"Well, I might, but my trousseau wouldn't. It would be all out of date. That would never do."

"And our feeling might be all out of date, too. That's the thing I'd be afraid of—gambling on the future—giving a promise that we'll feel as we do now a score of years hence. That's a great insolence."

"Barry, no—" She suddenly chilled and frightened. "Won't you be faithful—years and a day?"

He answered huskily: "Yes—look up—as long as I can see your eyes! But we'll not wait years and a day. We only have 'now.' We can only live 'now.'"

"Do you mean, then, that as soon as it's settled?"

He laughed, binding his arm about her: "What say, frail, if we go off on our vacation together? Have our honeymoon then?"

"In those few months from now? That soon?"

"Or sooner, an you will!"

CHAPTER LI

DISAPPOINTMENT

THEIR promise drew them to each other in a poignant, almost terrifying sense of nearness.

It filled Chickie with awe; mantled her with a shy, uncertain wonderment. She sometimes stopped abruptly in her work, saying with startled, hammering pulse: "Married! We'll soon be married—" Her thoughts drifted tremulously in a warm, vague excitement. They brought Barry to her as he touched her hair, raised her face in his hands. He was now become god-like—in his eyes, flame; in his voice, music—so he swept her.

She emerged from these dreams, flushed and confused, fearful lest Janina might have perceived and would begin to mock her. But in a little while the dreams returned like white birds communing in song about her ears—the more piercing because she listened alone.

Coming home with a new purchase, she had often a wish to drop in on Mary; to say merrily: "See what I bought to-day! And, oh—all the others in the second drawer of my bureau! Even Jennie doesn't know!"

One Saturday afternoon when she and Mary were on their way to Mission Street—like old times—trundling the go-cart, they passed a bungalow nearly completed. Chickie had almost said: "Mary, ole dear, like me for a neighbor? I'm thinking this very minute of moving into that darling little hole—me and my own!"

But, no—this holy thing—this love—keep it to herself. Wait till it was very certain.

But Chickie visited the bungalow herself. Smiling in timidity and eagerness, she passed the carpenters, studied each of the four bright sun-filled rooms. The kitchen with its white breakfast nook, its new, glistening cabinets, held her in a charm. Just fancy little dotted Swiss curtains on the windows and a few golden poppies in a yellow jar on that cunning little table!

A young workman in white plasterer's overalls came in from the porch, regarded her sheepishly: "Like it, miss? Guess you're a bride?"

"Oh, no! I'm just looking around for a friend of mine!" She hurried into the living-room.

Here her imagination reveled. It tossed a gorgeous blue rug on the floor—a heavy Chinese thing like that she had seen at Jake's. It put an odd rosewood desk in the corner, bookcases against the walls; bright, living coals in the open grate. They would sit here in the evenings, living out the sweet dream.

Just as the place was completed she and Barry passed it one Sunday. Chickie said, as though she had never noted it before: "Look at that shiny little place! Don't you just adore going through new houses?"

So they went in. And now finished, ready for some one to come and make of its four walls a home, it seemed to Chickie alive, a friendly personality bidding them welcome. When she saw that bookcases were already installed she smiled. Barry would like that.

A side window in the living-room gave on a low trellised gate opening to the back yard. They were standing at this window. She said suddenly: "You could easily train a rose to climb over that, couldn't you?"

He leaned down and grinned into her face: "Ah—mystery is solved! So that's why we come a house-hunting, is it?"

She colored: "Isn't it a sweet place?"

"It were."

"Don't you like it all cozy like this better than an apartment?"

"I do." And still looking into her face, his breath hurried, the intensity of his eyes made hers close: "I wish we were moving in to-day! Open them! Yes—you don't know how terribly I wish that, Chickie!"

She answered faintly: "Don't look at me so, Barry. You make me weak! Well, you do. Why, are you so impatient now and a little while ago you seemed to hold away—to be pushing me always from you?"

He laughed: "Couldn't get away with it, could I? I seem to be very much here, at present."

"You wanted to put me from you, didn't you? You never wanted to love me."

"Listen. Don't say that, Chickie, though it be true. Can't you see how it was? When the dear one sat next to me or gave me the blessed smile I wanted to grab her, crush her to death, that sweet she is! And there be a law which say it are

not right—though I doubt it—for a man to feel so for a maid. That is for a poor young man with nothing in his pockets. So it was crush you to death or beat it—”

“And now?”

“Now we have prospects! And they’ll ease the chains of matrimony! And he’ll marry the girl and get her off his mind. Lordee, Chickie, the way you come stealing in on me when I’m trying to work! The way you have of slipping your hand under mine. I’m all but ruined. My concentration has gone hang.”

“And you’ll marry me to get rid of me, Mr. Red?”

“That clever he is!”

“And shall we, perhaps, take this little place?”

“Or one like it on top of the earth where we can sit on our front porch and look down on the world and its mother, the mountains. And buy her a blue check apron to tie around her little waist—and she’ll cook his little meals.”

“And serve them at that little table! Oh—”

When they went out through the back yard and the trellised gate, Chickie picked a weed from the ground and stuck it in his buttonhole. “A rose it shall be before many moons!” She looked back at the cozy brown shingles—tenderly—as though the little house were already hers.

And every day afterward she passed it, thinking: “Not gone yet—” She came to regard it as destined for them. She looked at furniture in the shop windows and wondered which things would adapt most prettily to its small rooms.

One noon time when Barry did not meet her she went alone to a restaurant far down in California Street. She was half finished when Jake came over quietly and took the chair opposite. Black eyes and vivid mouth smiled with a kind indulgence that had in it a trace of sadness. Without prelude he said: “I hear you’re engaged, Chickie.”

She stammered: “Yes—why, who said that? I’m sure I don’t know who can be the fortunate swain.”

At that Jake’s laugh rang. “Our friend, Red, Chickie. Nice boy, but young—just starting. Others know it, Chickie—won’t you tell your old friend Jake about it? You know I’ve more than a passing interest.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Except that you and he have had lunch together every day for nearly six weeks. And he’s taken you out every night so

that no one else had a ghost of a chance. So I gather it's about half settled, anyway. I wonder if you're letting yourself in for a four or five year wait. I hope not!"

Her confusion grew. She didn't know what answer to make. She stumbled: "I don't know what you can be meaning, Jake."

"That it's a sorry business, Chickie, my dear, for a girl to deliberately plan to throw away the five best years of her life."

She laughed: "Don't weep for me, Jake, you kind, nice friend. Because I've no intention of throwing anything away—not one single little year. I'm going to gather them all in."

"Oh—" He pushed the things from him, leaned forward on his elbows, the rich, flashing smile going slowly over her face. "Chickie, if you change your mind between to-morrow and the week after or two days after that, more or less, will you let me know? Send me an S O S. Will you do that, Chickie?"

"I wonder if you'd like to see me dashed on the rocks just that you might rescue me? Am I to take it that you would?"

He repeated soberly: "Will you let me know, Chickie?"

"Tish! Well, I may, and then again I may not, seeing you wish me ill."

"You've never believed that, Chickie. I know you haven't. It's not true—now, anyway!"

The quiet strength in his voice, the stillness in his intent, handsome face moved her like his warm, magnetic hand pressing her palm to the table. She said nervously: "Indeed I know that, Jake. I think of you as—oh—as some nice friendly king—"

He helped her with her coat. "I'd like to be that and more to Helena Bryce. I'd like that mighty well."

She was touched. But as soon as she said good-by he was dismissed from her thoughts.

That night Barry and she drove to the beach. He sat a long while with his arms folded. Not even smoking. She moved toward him—waited.

And finally he put his arm about her. She could feel his breath, rough, heavy. He said, not looking at her: "I don't know how to tell you, Chickie. This is hell. Moore's gone. Back to New York. They've let the whole thing slide."

CHAPTER LII

SUMMER IDYLL

HIS hand touched hers. It was shaking, cold. But she had no heart to take it, or turn her fingers under his. Not going to be—all off—she was mute with the chill shock.

He entreated: "Chickie, say something."

But she closed her eyes, letting her hands lie quiet and shivering in her lap. Quickened to pain by her hurt, piercing silence, he bent toward her: "Ah, listen—may not be so bad—may come out all right. Don't feel so. Say something to me, Chickie."

"I don't know what—"

"But suppose we hadn't counted on this?"

"But we did! Oh, I counted on it terribly—"

He saw her lips trembling, and underneath his own baffled resentment there went, flushing and warm, a quiver of exultation. Soft and delicate, leaning against him. He said uncertainly: "You care that much, Chickie? Say it!"

"You know I do." She rubbed her fingers against her eyes. "But now you will begin to push me from you. Now it can't be, and you will think of all those things again—"

He took her hands and pressed them against his lips. "Like the devil I will! No! I can't. That's all there is to it. I won't!"

"You mean we'll just go on like this and wait those years?"

"Oh, something will happen. There will be other chances. Other fellows get by. We're still here, aren't we?" He laughed. "We can still have a kiss, can't we? It may come out. They may take it up again—"

But she had given herself too fervidly to the dream. Now she felt stilled and cold. She moved toward him, wanting achingly his arm about her. She said, trying to laugh: "I can wait if you can."

Everything reminded her of her hopes. She came into her room that night and, unthinking, opened the drawer where the filmy, exquisite things she had bought were hidden away. She closed it sharply.

And now when she passed the shingled bungalow, she hurried. At the end of the block she could never resist glancing

back. Seeing the "To Let" sign still in the window, brightness flashed through her. It was waiting for them. Might be—yet.

She told this to Barry. He had not tried to push her from him. He came more often to the window. He idled; he hurried to meet her in the alley at 5 o'clock. He said in moods of recklessness: "Let them go hang! We should ask their permission to love each other! Huh!"

It frightened her, seeing the flushed eagerness in his eyes. Then he would bend down and kiss her and laugh at her. She grew radiant, sure of his love. Now, when she spoke of the "shiny little place still waiting for them," he moved uneasily—took a long, harsh breath.

"Yes, yes, is it? Well—"

She answered with a high, nervous laugh: "We might have moved in next month—"

He pressed her hands—hurt her, he pressed them so hard. After a throbbing pause he said: "Something's got to happen. That's sure!"

It was August—the month they had planned for their vacation. No need to give that up—they could still have this joy together. So Chickie induced Jonathan and her mother to take a cottage on the river.

"An' I'll come up and be your swain and row ye about and teach you much wood lore." He crossed his arms about her shoulders. "Chickie, don't fall for any one else till I get there—will ye?"

"I think sometimes, Barry, that you love me more now. Do you?"

"Right ye are! It was enough before."

Their cottage clung to the wooded slope midway between the canyon floor and the top of redwood trees. In the first week Jennie went about humming to herself, standing on the porch, sighing: "Smell those trees! Isn't the air soft?" She laughed at her fancy. "Chickie, dear, God must be very close. It's so beautiful."

"I think He's perched in that branch up there, Jennie darling. Sometimes I feel him staring down!"

Jonathan, his great legs sprawled before him, smoked his pipe, went for the mail, made the fire in the kitchen stove. Or, sometimes, feeling a great young strength in his muscles, he sawed huge logs and called Chickie to watch the adroitness of his stroke.

She lay in a hammock, her head in her folded arms, gazing happily at a bit of blue sky that seemed dropping, like a scarf between swaying branches. She thought with a rush of expectation, "Day after to-morrow." She already had picked out the paths where they would walk; the pool in the river where they would swim. She imagined him rushing to her with an excited: "Well—they've sent word! It's going through!" They were always waiting for that—actually expecting it.

He came on Saturday. Oh, she made herself so pretty—white shoes and stockings—dress of rose and a great, drooping hat. Even the pert, audacious youngsters of fifteen and sixteen—all of them dolled and powdered and ruffled so that they looked like a gaudy riotous field of flowers—stared at the sweet, wistful grace of her as she waited at the station.

She scarcely noticed them. She strained her eyes down the track, catching her breath as the whistle roared; as an immense whirling feather of smoke circled upward.

First to get off—hurrying toward her—suitcase, books, boxes of candy—young face vital with eagerness. He saw her—jabbed her arm because his hands were filled with bundles: "Hello, dear!"

She laughed, unable to speak, walked with him through a lane of trees and glancing up found his mouth, full-cut and sweet, pursing at her daringly.

"Don't, Barry! I'm too happy now!"

He laughed: "Why not, frail! This is a near honeymoon, you know!"

And it seemed to Chickie that they had indeed entered a garden of enchantment. He was full of buoyance. They walked, they swam, they paddled about the river—early in the morning—late at night. A thousand gossamer threads woven of sunlight, of water, of moonbeams dropping on them through trees bound them together. Sometimes at night they walked through the canyon—a sacred hush whispering songs in their ears. He put his arm about her—kissed her. She felt her spirit was already his.

Other times they went to the dance because she loved that. A rough, open-air platform with the redwoods towering above them, half shutting out the sapphire sky. High school boys earning a dollar on their vacations furnished the music. Girls of fifteen, careless, radiant creatures, danced with the wiles of Salome, but smiled with the innocence of cherubs—a mys-

tery to some of the old ladies who came with their grandchildren and sat on the hard benches arranged about the floor. Outside, under the trees, other girls rested their heads on the shoulders of young boys. They smoked frankly.

Scandalized, the old ladies whispered the stale refrain: "What are these young people coming to? Look at that one in red. Some one should tell the girl's mother!"

A moment later the girl in red and her happy-go-lucky partner sauntered to the ice-cream parlor, and quite oblivious of the shock she had administered to the past generation, partook delightedly of strawberry sundaes and root beer.

To Chickie they were but bright, joyous youngsters, very much like herself except that they were still dwellers in a make-believe of sentiment. She had in her hands the warm, living reality—a love that was both beauty and terror.

It seemed that way in moments of shivering gladness when she acknowledged to herself the power of his word, his glance. Especially when he taught her to swim. She that had been frightened of the water plunged in like a young Undine. Once he made her swim across the pool and she knew it was so deep she might be sure to drown. But because he said, laughing, at her: "You will!" Because of that, she did it. He kept alongside of her. When they had almost reached the bank, he drew her head under the water and kissed her.

She was startled. "Don't do things like that, Barry. You take my breath away."

He did it again.

They came up the path. Jonathan, sitting on the porch, watched them absently. He listened to Chickie's glad, crystalline laughter. Afterward, as she dressed, he came and stood beside her. He raised her face in his great palms, looking at her till she blushed and tried to pull free. He whispered: "Chickie, girl—you're very happy?"

"Oh, Jonathan!" Her eyes filled. She said hastily: "It's so glorious here. I wish we could stay forever."

She had an idea that everything was blessedly settled now. It would come out all right, and soon. Because he seemed to feel that way, too.

One day they swam across the river and were lying on the sand, half hidden by trees. He had his head against her arm. Half shy, she kept looking at his long, muscular form—so clean,

and then at his face, the red hair wet and slicked back from his forehead.

He laughed and, reaching up, pulled off her cap, so that her hair fell down. "Like me, frail? Stoop down and put your wet lips here!"

"No—wait. You know—you seem so happy—why, Barry?"

"A secret—"

"Tell me."

"Wrap your hair around me and I will."

"No—"

"I'll tell you, anyway. I wired to Moore. Told him we'd got to know. So I think we're a cinch to win in a week or two! That's why." He pulled her down. "It's a good thing, Chickie! Lordee, I could never wait five years."

She was half crying with excitement.

"Could you, Chickie?"

"Don't ask—never mind. I hope—"

"Well—I feel sure."

They talked about it—they planned. They waited for that answer. It came Friday.

CHAPTER LIII

CORNERED

ERECT and tall, brown shirt open at his throat, and all the sixteen-year-olds smiling at him, Barry stood in the long line before the postoffice window. He gave Chickie an expectant wink: "Get the big word to-day!"

Charley, grouchy and slow, pushed letters under the grating. Their turn now. He glanced at the writing, stuffed them in his pocket, and taking Chickie's arm, all but ran her along the road back to the cottage.

They walked swiftly. Below them the river winding like a bright snake between the willows. A boy, his body gleaming like bronze, leaped from a diving board into the water.

Both of them were breathless. "From Tufts," he said, tearing the envelope. She pressed against him, looking over his arm.

He said: "Well!" his face blanching. He doubled the paper in his hand.

Chickie reached for it, saw at the end of the short page this sentence: "Moore doesn't mention your appointment. They've evidently dismissed the plan—for the present, at any rate."

She folded the sheet carefully. Not glancing at him, she whispered, "Barry—it won't matter—" She found it hard to breathe.

They plunged on recklessly. The veins in his neck swelled. The heat made her limp. They sat down under a tree.

He said, grim and spent: "That settles it. We can cook!"

She threw off her hat and leaned against the tree. He stared at her white forehead, her hair bright against the redwood bark. He took her hand, saying roughly: "But doesn't this seem insanity to you?"

"What?"

"This—this here! They can control us! Tell us when to go and when to come. It's slavish—"

She closed her eyes, letting her head rest on his shoulder. After a while she murmured, smiling: "But we love each other any way! No one can stop that."

He answered, troubled: "I don't know what we should do."

All afternoon he watched her with eager, doubtful eyes. As they lay on the beach on a little slope he took her hand. He pressed it in the sand and pressed his mouth in its hollow—held her like that a long while.

She felt a tremendous pity and longing. She wanted to creep close to him, put her cheek on his—rub her hand over his hair. She said: "Barry—there may be other word to-morrow."

"No—no, there won't."

That night they paddled down the river. Other boats passing them in the narrow channel flung out laughter and snatches of song that in the darkness echoed with a deep, mysterious sadness. He said suddenly: "Let's walk."

They went up the sandy bank into a deep planting of prune trees—an orchard just along the water's edge. He put his arm about her, feeling for her hand. They walked like this in silence.

The night above them sat warm, quiet, wearing the moon like a soft yellow topaz on its breast. The river murmured gently. All about them, a rhythmic and infinite peace. It stole with a melting sweetness into Chickie's thought. She reached her free hand to his neck. When he kissed her, she whispered, laughing: "Barry—anyway, it's beautiful. Life is beautiful."

He answered with a short, rough breath: "No—life is hard."

"Why do you say that?"

"It is!" And he was still searching her eyes, bending down to her—he drew her to him, his heart thumping. It knocked against her. "It's hard, Chickie! I love you. Lordee! I love you."

The pallor of his drawn face, so near to hers, held her motionless. "As much as that, Barry? Do you really?"

"Chickie—oh, Lord!"

She put her hands—both of them—hard against that furious pulsing. She gave a little astonished cry. He wound his arms about her, holding her rigid. She said breathless: "No—don't."

But he moved his lips over her face. He said harshly: "Chickie—what are we to do! Tell me, Lordee, Chickie, what are we waiting for?"

She sank from him; sank to the sands, burying her face in her arms. A terrible weakness that throbbed and half fainted passed about her.

He let her cry. After a while he came over, kneeling beside her. He took her hand gently with a quiet: "Is this the way you feel about me, Chickie?"

"Barry—you break my heart."

He stared at her, his young mouth grim and reckless. "Why? Because I love you? Is that such an awful sin? What have I done that's so terrible, Chickie? Let you see that I love you—that I want you now and not some day that may never come? What's awful about that?" He laughed bitterly. "We have no right to want each other. Moore isn't ready! I haven't the money!"

From the depths of a throbbing suffocation she pleaded weakly: "Don't talk like this, Barry. Oh, you mustn't."

"But I feel like this, Chickie. This is the way I feel. I can't stand it—that's all."

A deathly chill wrapped down over the pressing heat. She took his face in her hands. "Then it isn't love, Barry."

Little, bitter movements went about his lips: "No—by the Lord! It's hell!"

They sat in an aching quiet. It seemed to Chickie that time—whole centuries of it—went dragging by with cold, sodden feet.

Then he was standing. Then he said heavily: "We might as well go."

His hand as he helped her to her feet was like ice. The look on his face, so gray and still, frightened her. He said nothing at all. When they reached the cottage, he turned to her a moment, a look beseeching and anxious like a prayer in his eyes.

He waited till she crossed the porch. She heard his steps going down the gravel path. She listened, fearful, as to some compelling and terrible music that in its growing faintness carried her heart from her.

She lay awake that night, the look of drawn suffering on his face passing again and again before her like a pale, unhappy ghost. Suddenly she sat up, the night air blowing chill on her bare shoulders. She remembered with a stab of terror that she had turned from him hastily when his eyes caught her with that look of eager pleading. And he had gone without saying a word.

With the memory, a wildness swept through her. She saw herself stepping from the bed, running down the gravel path—calling him back, tugging at his sleeve—holding him.

Overpowering fear crept about her. What could he do?

Where was he? She wanted to get up and go stealing to him. If she had only put her arms about him; if she had only whispered softly, holding his head against her heart.

She wanted to do that. She would do it! The longing and the pity of the afternoon came over her faint and hot.

Then she heard his voice low and harsh: "What are we to do, Chickie? Tell me that—"

She cowered down in the bed, staring at the thousand stars glowing with quiet silver in the dark bosom of the night. Oh—he didn't mean that—he was excited—he was unnerved—

He would take it all back in the morning. The sun would be out. They would dash into the cold water—

She put her arms over her face, closed out thoughts—closed out echoes. They dropped into her heart, heavy and alive. They stormed there.

She shrank from meeting him again.

CHAPTER LIV

ANOTHER BREACH

BEFORE Jennie was stirring the next morning, Chickie stole from bed. She felt a shakiness all through her as though each nerve vibrated with its separate fear. She pinned a note on the kitchen stove:

"Jennie, darling, I forgot to tell you that your angel child is having breakfast on the beach. It's all the rage. Give Jonathan ten kisses and my share of bacon."

She went softly down the gravel path, rushing along one moment by her tormented anxiety, held back by a shrinking reluctance.

When she saw him through the willows, sitting in the canoe, motionless as though he had been there all night, her heart leaped. He waited quiet like the gray morning—a part of the chill, austere scene, the gray water and the gray mists but half parted by the sun climbing dimly over the tree tops.

She began to run. She touched his shoulder and laughed. Then her eyes filled, seeing his face so white; his mouth set, yet trembling.

Without speaking they paddled down the cool river, dragged the canoe to a little sandy beach. He made a fire, gathering sticks and papers, snapping the branches of a dead tree. Then he set the coffee on to simmer.

When the bacon wreathed with pungent fragrance about them and he had succeeded in frying two or three eggs without getting them black or sooty he took a wooden plate and offered them to Chickie. He made her look at him, his eyes humble and pleading. "Chickie, are you angry with me? Do you want never to see me again?"

"You hurt me so. Oh, terribly—"

"I know. I'm sorry. Don't hold it against me."

Her laugh broke forth, happy as the breeze: "I knew you didn't mean it. Why, Barry, I was sure of that."

He lapsed into moodiness, breathing heavily. She pushed a

little mound of sand toward him: "Why are you looking so black?"

"I'm not so sure about things, Chickie—about anything. I don't know how you feel, but this seems ghastly to me—putting everything in the future. Letting others tell us how we should feel and when. One way you look at it it's sordid. It's making a slave of yourself. It's calling emotions shameful and they are nothing of the sort! It's making our feelings mark time to our purse and they won't do it. And it's degrading to ask it. It's putting money first and love second. We shouldn't have to do that. I've always felt so!

"And if you look at it coldly, what's the sense of it? We may be dead in five or six years. Heaven knows we'll never love each other more than we do right now. Then why is it wrong? Why does it seem so terrible to you? It's not to me!"

She looked into her coffee cup. The sun, now triumphant, made a little whirling light on its dark surface. Her eyes blinked. She tried to speak, but her chin, doubling up, trickled her into silence.

He was looking up to her and waiting, a restless, strained supplication on his mouth. He said hurriedly: "Don't look so, Chickie. Don't feel so bad. I'm only talking. I keep loving you and wanting you more and more and I can't see what difference any hokus-pokus third party is going to say over us will make. It won't make our love any righter. It can't! It's as right as the sun—as the river flowing down here to meet the ocean! It is to me—"

Seeing the pretty eyes he liked so well, shutting, tears spattering into her coffee, he moved up and sat beside her; took the cup from her hands: "Chickie, listen! why so melancholic? Let me rant a little. No sin in that. Chickie, you don't know how sweet you are—how, even sitting here near you—oh, well—I can't help that. Look up—let me see your eyes—please. You're the only girl—yes, you are—I love you. I can't see why I shouldn't—can't see why Moore and his plans should stop me. You're not going to cry, Chickie? Don't—

"But we're funny things, aren't we? With our little conventions stuck up like umbrellas to keep us dry against the rain of another's disapproval. Look at these minnows—how idiotic now if they should suddenly organize to make life unbearable for each other; to put a taboo on freedom and happiness; to

pass a law ordering minnows not to dart out of the water at sundown; not to snatch insects for food! What's the difference?

"If the world said it was all right for two sweet, brave things like thee and me to live and love, you'd feel quite different, wouldn't you? And this redhead wouldn't be the black beast, huh?"

"I don't think that, Barry—I don't want to think that. I lay awake all last night—"

"Thinking hard things of me, Chickie? Did you?"

"No—loving you."

He pressed her hand, turning his head swiftly from her. "Chickie, listen—I won't trouble you again. You're too sweet—that's the trouble—well—"

He became buoyant, losing the furious resentments. He poked up the fire, heated the coffee for her and, taking the cup she had held, threw out its contents with a merry: "There go the dear one's tears! Dry 'em!"

Her spirit caught the fervor of his. They ran into the water, and when they swam he pulled her down and kissed her. "Another sin for you, frail. Like it?"

They went for a long ride in the canoe, bumping over rapids, laughing when they were unexpectedly dumped into a shallow pool. And when she felt the water deepening and threw up her arms in panic, he grabbed her hair, dragged her a little, grinning and teasing. She was almost in tears because of the relief and joy.

But when it neared evening and he wanted to know what plan she had for the night she said, not meeting the eagerness in his eyes: "Barry, we've had such fun to-day . . . I'm awfully tired. You know, just for a change, I think I'll go to bed early."

He said quietly: "You're thinking of last night, Chickie."

She glanced steadfastly at the water, stirring up a little whirlpool with her bare foot.

"Is that it, Chickie?"

"Well—but isn't it better this way, Barry?"

"You mean that it's safer. Is that it, Chickie? But if you begin to argue in this manner you'll end by saying we shouldn't see each other at all. It will come to that! It will, Chickie! Is that what you want? Do you want that?"

He stood at her side, holding her arm, speaking in a rapid,

hoarse tone that made her wish to close her eyes, lean against him, shut her ears.

She said, entreating: "Don't! Barry, don't go on like this."

He said in a low whisper: "If you want this, Chickie, you ought to say it."

She answered in a half sob: "I'd rather die."

But she didn't meet him that night, nor the next Monday morning they paddled to a bend in the stream and here the willows, high and slender, came down to the water's edge. They pulled up their boat, and after a little swim, lay on the bank in the soft mellow sun.

When she took off her cap and let her hair fall, he turned his face away. She could see the strong curve of his neck, his well-set, shapely head.

"You turn your back on me, Mr. Red?"

"You're the one that does that."

"Oh, no, I don't."

"Yes. And what did I do that's so unforgivable? What, Chickie?"

She traced her name in the wet sands. "I think you've made me afraid, Barry."

"Because I love you, Chickie?"

"I don't know—oh, I don't know—"

"I can't help loving you, Chickie. There's no way out of that. I can't put my feelings in a vacuum for the next five years."

She asked forlornly his question: "What are we to do, Barry?"

"I suppose I'll have to go. I don't see any other solution the way things are all shot to pieces now." He looked at her then, his eyes dark and furious and demanding, but his voice scarcely audible: "Do you want me to offer this, Chickie?"

She sat motionless in an attitude of broken resignation. She leaned back, resting her weight on either hand. The sun made lights in her hair.

Seeing this and the plea unspoken on her lips, his heart burned. He crept upward, put a hand on each of hers, pressing them into the wet sand. "Chickie—listen; I can't do this. Must I? Oh, Chickie, this is murder. This is killing a thing in us that has a right to be. No matter what you say is right or wrong, this is an unholy thing to do!"

"Don't, Barry, I can't stand this! You don't—oh, please!" She lowered her head, hiding it against his arm.

He gave up then. He pushed his hair clean from his forehead, shielding his face from her. After a long while he said, heavily, a thing that froze her to the soul: "Maybe you're right. Maybe it ought to end now—"

She wanted to cry out; bind him fast to her.

But she held her heart breaking in her hands and watched him go.

CHAPTER LV

THE PARTING

SHE didn't think that he would go—never dreamed that he could mean it.

When she saw him coming up the path, dressed for the train, snappy and buoyant in gray suit and knitted tie, she stole from the porch along the trail leading through madrones to the hilltop. She heard Jonathan's astonished: "Why, lad—going?" And his answer: "Yes, I've got to. Tufts sent word. Is Chickie around?"

Jonathan called. Then Barry, knowing perhaps, pushed through the shrubs and overtook her.

She saw his face; there was no buoyance in it.

"Lord, Chickie—don't you even want to say good-by?"

"So you're going, Barry? Oh—really—"

The vital, impetuous face looked at her in hot, silent accusation. "Is there anything else for me to do? I don't see it!"

"You're cruel."

"You force me to it."

A little hysterical laugh: "Barry, you think just distance will make any difference? It won't to me! Oh—I can't make myself stop now—"

He said with passionate contempt: "Well—it's safe, Chickie!"

She turned against the sapling tree, covering her face with her arm. He came over and turned her to him, put her head on his shoulder, wiping her eyes with his hand: "Chickie, don't! Tell me anything else we can do. I don't know what it can be. This seems frightful to me. It's cowardly. We love each other. That ought to be enough. I've said this—I've told you. And now after all we've said—after all we've felt—"

Her thought melted; a warm anguish flowed through all her veins. She felt the sun streaming about them in a flood, hot, overpowering. She wished that she might die there in his arms; make him hold her so until the life went from her. She said weakly: "You won't go, Barry, no—leave me now?"

He answered bitterly: "You're crueller than I, Chickie. You don't know it. But you are!"

The grimness of his mouth hurt her. She began to tremble,

swept by her terrible pity and longing. She put her hands against him, the blood fanning in a hot tide from her heart. She was afraid and whispered faintly: "Oh!" After a moment: "You better go."

She knew that he kissed her; that his hand ran again and again over her hair; that he bent down to her whispering: "It's no use! It's too late now. Chickie, you love me? Oh, say it—please—look up—you won't? You want me to go? You think I should offer this?"

Then he was going with hurried steps down the path; twigs snapped; leaves rustled. She was alone.

She felt her spirit numb in a coldness, bleaker than death—Gone! He was gone! The bald, incredible fact smote her, seeming suddenly monstrous—grotesque—unnecessary. Gone—why?

She began running down the trail, in her wildness, her feet stumbled. Then she heard Jennie moving about the kitchen, singing in a gentle, high falsetto. She crept back. . . .

Silence.

The train going out, carrying him away, carrying her heart, her thought. Leaving her to sink in this stark emptiness, leaving her to struggle with this gaunt specter—gone. He was gone now.

Hours she sat there, limp, overpowered, drinking in the impossible cruelty of his leaving. Again and again she started to her feet, goaded by a thousand memories. They assailed her like brutal whips.

"You're sending me away, Chickie. You think I should offer this?" And the strained passion of supplication on his lips— She fought against the lash—and took it. Yes—sent him away. She had done this—pushed him from her. Told him to go.

And now she lay here beating the earth in a frantic protest—calling him back, denying with impotent anguish the thing she had done.

Oh, she would have him back—call him! She could feel his arms about her, hand wiping her eyes; feel her spirit sinking to its knees; clinging to his. She lay on the ground motionless, beaten by this storm of ruthless emotion.

Leaves crunching—Jonathan calling: "Chickie! Chickie girl!" Loud, anxious . . . calling again.

She hid in the shrubs. Plodding of his heavy feet: "Oh, Chickie—where are you? Dinner's ready!"

And she had to hurry down, bathe her eyes, talk gayly, pretend, laugh, answer. All the while her thought went blindly in a vivid hooting with echoes.

They bore down on her that night as she lay in bed, staring upward at the stars, all hushed the song within her heart. She heard him laughing as he pulled her head beneath the water, kissed her with his teasing: "Another sin, frail! Like it?" Only yesterday—

Then the tenderness that caught her with such thrill as he promised: "I won't bother you again. You're too sweet, Chickie! That's the trouble." Tears ran down her temples to the pillow.

Oh—it couldn't be—couldn't be. They loved each other so! He would come. She would send for him. She must.

She wouldn't accept the hard finality of parting—wouldn't take this despondence. Somewhere in the cup was the bright sparkle of hope. She drank that. She had to. It was life. She clung to it.

In the morning a feverish impatience—almost a gladness seized her. He would wire—send a telegram. He would say: "Ah, listen, Chickie, I can't stay here. I'm coming back!" She must get that message—hug it to her. She hurried to the station.

There was no word. Nor the next day. It was the beginning of days that devastated her mind, tore away its poise and left in its place only a wild, aching protest; made her heart a clamorous, seething thing that awakened her in the night, weak and terrified by its demanding.

She lay there wide-eyed—listening. Often it seemed that the stillness of the forest rang and there came flashing through the dark a music: "Ah, Chickie—you're so dear. I love you!" She murmured again and again: "Come back—"

It was terrible being around Jonathan; meeting his kind, half-teasing eyes. Jonathan had such a way of raising her face and searching it, chuckling: "Chickie, girl, lonesome?"

That chin of hers would tremble so, but he'd hold her anyway!

"Of course, of course—Jonathan, don't!"

"Won't tell your old dad? You love the lad?"

She managed to laugh. "Oh, I'm all full of love, you know. That's all there's to us weak, wandering wimmin!"

"Keep a heart, girl! He'll be here again. No time at all to Sunday."

That—or a scene like it, day after day—

Thursday she went to the station, stood in the long, frivolous line. She had to dress herself, comb her hair all smooth, laugh, chat—wait. But nothing seemed to her necessary.

Wanda Lent, pretty in a vivacious gypsy fashion and one of the youngsters who had tried archly to flirt with Barry and had even asked him to paddle her to the beach once, stood at Chickie's side. This had happened three times. Twice she had seen Chickie walk away without receiving any mail. Now she whispered in the fulsome sympathy of sixteen: "Oh, you ole dear, I hope you get one to-day. Not much of a letter writer, is he?"

Chickie answered flippantly: "Oh, these men, Wanda! Out of sight—out of mind!"

"Now—I don't know about that. I guess, perhaps, he's coming up again to-day or to-morrow? Don't you let him go or I might take him!"

"I'll tell him, Wanda." And she had to keep that up while old Charley fuddled over the mail, shifting his spectacles, answered a long distance telephone. She was shaking lest there be no mail again to-day—hating Wanda's eager, sympathetic glance.

There was a letter. It was from Janina. Chickie tore it open. A sentence in the middle of the page leaped to her. It told a thing of Barry. Chickie read it leaning on the bridge over the creek. She was unable to walk further . . . held in a fainting weakness.

CHAPTER LVI

DESPONDENCE

IN the middle of the page Janina had written: "So you've turned our brave Red over to Ila, and he's flying to New York to settle it up quick. Congratulations, my dear protégée. Glad to see you're getting sense."

Chickie saw only that. She leaned against the bridge. Fogs that were thick and pulsed swirled about her. Her head grew light and cold.

Through the trees went the flash of bright Summer dresses, young girls waving their letters, beckoning to one another, laughing. They seemed remote, drifting farther and farther from her. The sun, too, was passing, and she herself sinking into these gray, thronging mists that touched with such chill fingers on her face and in her thought.

Some one passed, said "Good-morning." She heard it dimly—gave no answer. Some one bumped against her—a laugh, and three girls surrounded her. Wanda Lent, teasing: "Must be a bear of a letter! Let's see the first line?"

She was aware of smiling vaguely, stuffing the letter in her blouse, pushing them away; then of hurrying blindly up a little, unused trail through the canyon. She sat down behind a huge wall of sand that half blocked an old wagon road.

No thought came to her—only this fainting weakness stealing the life from her heart. She sat there a long while without impulse to move: to protest. She said to herself: "I must go. I can't sit here." But she didn't stir.

A corner of the heavy envelope, stuck so hastily in her blouse, pressed against her flesh. Heat like guilt rose through her. She touched the letter, drew it out furtively, smoothed it slowly on a shelf of the rock.

Janina had more to say: "Met Tufts on the street just half an hour ago. He gave me the low-down, though he didn't know it. What a shock! I thought you were gone for fair on the boy. I had visions of walking slowly before you to the altar. Instead, off goes the groom to the big town; to limos and Wal-

dorf-Astoria dinners and steam yachts! Some lure to the brain of callow youth, I'll say!"

It didn't occur to Chickie to doubt this. She let it sweep over her in rolling, desolate waves that bore her down and in their ebbing sucked the warmth from her veins.

In her mind there grew an image of him going with hurried steps down the path, twigs snapping; and of herself, crouching against the tree, listening for the steps to return.

Farther away now—steps growing fainter—no sound at all.

"Gone—" she said this aloud, and suddenly a frightened pulsing shot through her mind. "Gone. Flying to New York. Gone for good."

She got to her feet and began running down the road, a blazing in her thought. Stop him—call him back! That was it. Tell him not to go.

When she came in sight of the station her sudden wild courage flickered. In a whimpering misery she began accusing herself: "You sent him. You pushed him into it. You made him go."

In a way that gripped her so that she stood motionless, as though confronted by a living presence, that last moment under the madrone returned. He was bending down to her. He was saying: "Chickie, you love me. Oh, say it! You won't? You want me to go? Chickie, it's too late now."

Too late now—her thought stopped at that, seized it. That was what he said. He cared too much. He couldn't let it end. "You don't want me to go, Chickie. Oh—look up, say it. After all we've felt? After all we've told each other—"

A trembling caught her. A sudden, piercing light seemed running through her mind, touching on all these words, these moments of shivering gladness; these promises, bringing them to her alive and glowing. Bringing him near, repeating them.

Oh—as though he had forgotten! As though four days could put it from him. And he would run away now and never think again—

Slowly, as one waking from a dream of torture, she said: "It's not true. He isn't going."

Telling herself this she became lucid. She thought of Janina's letter and grew hot with shame.

What did Janina know of Barry's thoughts; of the pleading eagerness in his eyes? What did she know of all these million threads that bound the two of them together?

But she had allowed Janina to crush her; to throw bitter doubt on him. He had gone from her, but no sooner had the echoes of his steps vanished than her hope rose mightily, insisting: "He'll come back!" Now at a mocking sentence from Janina she had accepted his faithlessness; had seen him rushing off to New York; to gayety and Ila Moore.

She took out the letter and read it coldly. But even in this arrogant return of confidence kept creeping a little restless fear. Why should she write this? Janina wasn't vicious. Janina rarely lied. If she had met Tufts and he had said this—

It began again, stealing over her in these sickening, remorseless waves. He was gone. She had sent him.

When she said to herself—"Gone," it was as though a hand pulled her under black, struggling waters, held her there.

She fought back as one against drowning. She struggled against these doubts. And suddenly a plan shaped itself. She turned and walked swiftly to the station.

With action, an odd strength came to her. The thing she was to do now seemed clear, inevitable. Hope whispered: "Yes! Of course! He expects this! He's waiting for it."

She would ring him up; tell him quietly, "Don't go, Barry. You don't need to. Come here."

In a flame she went into the station, put in her call—waited. Now her heart knocked with fear; now it warmed with hope. She held herself blank and trembling, putting down this burning suspense.

The bell jangled. She sprang to her feet, took the hook down slowly. To the girl's impatient: "Well—hello—hello," she answered, shaking: "Mr. Dunne, please?"

Her thought collapsed at the crisp rejoinder, "Gone for the day!" Only a whisper came to her throat. The silence appalled her. She managed faintly: "Wait—wait a moment."

"Yes—well—"

"Will he be in to-morrow?"

"Just a moment." Now the girl had covered the mouth-piece, but her loud: "Nell, is Dunne coming back? Has he left yet? Dame wants to know," came roughly against Chickie's ears.

The girl said: "Call again at four, will you? I'm not just sure when he is to leave."

Chickie said blindly: "You mean for New York?"

An abrupt: "Yes. Mr. Tufts will be in at four. He can tell you."

She sat down on the bench, an icy stillness in her mind—a cold, hushed faintness all about her. She sat there limp, motionless in an absence of feeling, only this clammy weight pressing at her heart.

And presently Charley came fumbling into the dingy station, pulled the grating of the postoffice window. "Going to lock up now, Miss Bryce. You got your call, didn't you?"

She got up quietly and went up the road. She stole cautiously past the cottage, went up the trail to the hill. She sat there staring at other hills. And suddenly she wished that she might die; she had a wish to creep under the shoulder of the mountain, hide beneath its quiet, impassive strength.

She began to cry. Her tears surprised her. They grew violent. As they tore through her, shaking her pulses into life, they wakened protests in a storming wildness. She locked her hands together. She said: "No! No!" She imagined herself rushing to the city, grabbing him by the arm, demanding in a fury: "Stay! Oh, you'll not go!"

She imagined him turning to her, smiling, saying: "Oh—you want me, Chickie?"

A terrible melting came softly through her. She put out her hand as though he were there to take it. She started, feeling almost that he had touched her shoulder. Oh—she would cling to him. . . .

All afternoon this storm beat her. She came down to the cottage feeling that her life was passing from her. She heard Jonathan sawing logs, Jennie puttering about the kitchen, moving the kettle, and these things seemed tremendously remote from her.

As she came into the room that was hers on the table was a book he had given her. She turned from it sharply. She went into the closet and hid her face in the green dress that he loved her to wear.

He had said to her: "Ah—so beautiful she is!" Gone now—she had sent him.

It seemed to her then that she would give up her life and gladly to hear that again.

That night she sat on the porch, huddled down in her big coat. She felt that she was dying. She hoped that she was.

Cold—stars, but no moon—silence. Then an automobile

honked. She listened till the sound died. She stared into the shadows. One of them moved along the path. She watched it. She got up curiously and moved to the rail of the porch. The shadow came toward her. Overcome with fear she cried out. She saw a face emerging. She said: "Barry!"

He reached up and caught her in his arms.

CHAPTER LVII

THE ISLAND

SHE moved toward him in a dream. In the wonder of his coming she felt lifted from the earth to a world of living radiance. It was so that night and the next day.

He said with a boy's breathless eagerness. "You're not angry, Chickie? Listen—I had to come. Only for a day. Oh—you won't mind that?"

She gave a little wild laugh and wouldn't let him see her face nor the wetness in her eyes. She whispered only: "No. I'm glad you came. Tell me now—"

For it was true. He was going to New York. Moore had wired him to come as casually as though it were but a trip to Oakland. He would stay in the East a few days. The appointment might be settled.

"So I had to tell you that, Chickie. It's all right, isn't it?"

"Yes—if it's only true now—you think it is, Barry?"

"We won't count on it too much. We don't want to do that again, do we?"

But they walked up the trail. And they counted on it. They faced each other, trembling in the dark; they whispered: "Perhaps! Oh, it's sure to be now. It has to be—"

They had a day—the whole of the next day for the dream. They lay on the sands along the river and talking of this glowing future that might soon be theirs, they were drawn in a closeness so poignant it was almost pain. He looked up at her and smiled. She could have wept with joy. He touched her hand; it shot her veins with fire.

Then he said, seeking her eyes: "Chickie, do you feel bound to me?"

Masking her eagerness, she asked artlessly: "Why, what do you mean? Do I owe you anything, kind sir?"

"You do, indeed. But answer this: Could you have let me go?"

"Could you have gone?"

"I seem to be here, don't I? Kicked out on my face and back again! No—I couldn't have gone. I don't want to—"

She laughed to hide a shouting exultance: "But I hear tell as how New York is full of lures for callow youth and you may forget the fair one in the woolly West. You may go and come again no more."

He said quietly: "I tried to do that, Chickie. You seem to have something of me that I can't take back. I wish—"

"What—"

"Nothing—" But a flush dashed to his temples. He went on rapidly: "That you loved me more than anything on earth—"

She stopped him. "I think I do."

They talked like this for hours—lying in the sun. They poured out this golden wine and made a chalice of each other's hearts.

When it came evening and she stood at the little wooden shelf that served for a bureau in the crude room she dressed as though kings were to see her. She looked into the stained, clouded mirror and laughed, saying with a lilt: "Well—yolk of an egg, shall you outshine the sun? Not if Helena Bryce can help it!" She put perfume behind her ears and a few lavish drops on her hair.

When she ran down to meet him on the path his breath caught. He said, teasingly: "Wimmin is wicked."

They went down to the beach. He held her hand. "Only a few hours more, Chickie." But when she wiped her eyes he added: "What a sorry loveress you are!"

"But you'll soon be going, Barry."

"It may not be for long, Chickie."

"What do you mean by that? Aren't you sure—very sure?"

He laughed. "Does one ever know, Chickie? We only have this hour for our own. Suppose the train goes dashing off the track—"

"No—don't! Oh, I dreamed of a thing like that." She tightened her fingers on his hand.

It was late, but no moon traversing the inky sky. A thousand stars strewed with faint diamonds the dark breast of the water. Up and down the stream was no sound but a gentle lap-lap against the shore; no motion but a fish leaping in the air.

He whispered, bending down against her ear: "Black, isn't it? Are you afraid?"

"No. It only makes you nearer."

"You feel like that, Chickie? You want me near?"

"Hush—oh, Barry, let's not say a word—nothing. This is like a dream, isn't it? I feel so."

He slid the canoe into the stream. His paddle struck the water. Sitting in the bottom of the boat, she rested against him. They went down the river, skirting close to the willows, where the channel was deepest. Shadows from overhanging banks and shrubs massed in a still dark, closing about them.

It seemed to her that they two were moving from the world into this vast, eternal silence and there was no sound but the thunder of her heart. Now and then he let the boat drift. He stooped and kissed her. She felt it more than she could bear.

Absently she murmured: "Barry, I feel as though you and I were going far away together. Oh, I hate to let you go alone. I wish this night would last and last."

He ran his hand along her shoulder. She felt it shake and turned her cheek against his palm. He said, quickened: "You'd love me enough for that, Chickie? To go away with me?"

"To die for you."

A short, rough sound, half laugh: "You mean that? Chickie, if this was our last hour—oh, suppose—you'd care enough for all—would you?"

"Oh—"

"Tell me—"

The boat rested in a cove between two rocks. Across from them a small islet, like a little black world, alone. They saw it—dim, imperturbable, heavy with shrubs.

Now, because her heart flushed wildly, she murmured: "And that little islet was out in the ocean and only you and I in all the world?"

"Yes! Would you care enough then?"

Words, tumult, eagerness rushed to her lips. She tried to laugh: "Oh, you mean if we were dying and the world coming to an end and every one else all gone—"

"Oh, tell me—" He took her head in his hands and drew it back against his knees. He stooped and whispered on her mouth: "Chickie, our last hour, if it were? It may be. Who knows? Would you, then?"

She felt rather than saw the hotness in his face; felt to his finger tips the nerve vibrant. She reached up with a faint cry and touched his face. She pleaded softly: "Barry—don't—oh—if that were so—"

But he pressed her face and laughed: "You would! Oh, say

it! I love you enough for that, Chickie. And you? I'm bound to you. Nothing can draw us closer. You know. Four days of torture. I feel a thousand ties. I want to feel them. All to-day they drew me."

Flame came from his eyes and burned her heart. She said excitedly: "Oh, really? I felt that, too—oh—what are you doing—stop—"

The boat shot out, went flying across the stream, jarred against the islet, scraping the rock. She cowered against his knees, gave a sharp frightened cry: "Barry—you'll drown us both—oh, stop—"

His hands gripped her shoulders, ran down and held her arms. He whispered hoarsely: "Chickie—"

Her heart melted. A warm heavy dew, intoxicating and oppressive, fell about her. She sat motionless, protesting, as he swung himself out on the rock, reached for her hand.

All through her went cruelly a terrifying shiver that ended in a clutch of anguish at her throat. Almost in a swoon, she heard herself saying: "No—that's steep—"

Within her another voice clamored, insistent, urgent: "No! Stay back. You don't have to go! Say no!—now!"

But he was reaching down and lifting her. He was holding out his hand. She clung to it. She followed him.

CHAPTER LVIII

THE BOTTOM OF THE CUP

IN her mind was a black spot of terror. It grew large—a stark, live thing, shaking her pulse with dread. It was the memory of the night.

She shrank from it. It pressed down and seized her heart. It was a dark, heavy beast crouching on her chest. She tried to beat it off. It came nearer and blew warm, sickening breaths in her nostrils. Fighting, she had to draw them down. Again and again. Till even the anguish within her stifled and was still.

She lay in this cold abandon, motionless, afraid to turn. She tried to sleep. No sooner were her eyes closed than images let loose beneath their lids. She saw herself in the canoe, leaning against his knees, reaching up her hands to touch his face. She remembered searchingly the wild, hot tumult of her heart, the livid sounds her lips had spoken: "Love you enough to die for you! Oh—and that little islet was out in the ocean and only you and I in all the world—only us, Barry—every one else all gone—"

All that—and that was but half of what she had said—

Now—in the whimpering chill of her spirit she could have slain this other 'Chickie'; beaten to death the vain, fevered thing standing before the mirror putting perfume at her ears. Laughing at herself, radiant and excited. Running down to meet him. Expectant—half aware, paddling into the still dark of the river; letting it sweep them into the wild, hushed ardor of this dream.

Not she who had done this! Not she, swept helpless in that blaze of emotion, clinging to his hand, following him up the rocky slope of the islet. Oh—it was never she. She would awaken soon from this night of torture: be glad again; get back to yesterday, to the morning, lying joyous in the sun.

And that other who sank in his arms with a faint. "Yes—oh, don't"; who took his white, vivid face in her hands, imploring when he murmured hoarsely: "Chickie—we love each other—think of that—I love you—" that other would vanish.

But even her thought could not achieve this; could not leap behind that eternal moment. The past was gone; shut out

irrevocably by this red, aching wall of flame. She could never beat it down. Cry—yes—smother her head in the pillow—claw her hands against her face—let the tears pour. It would remain.

She hid from it—oh, she would get away—push off this thing of horror weighing so heavily on her breast. Be free—be light again. . . .

She hated herself. Turning on the pillow, her hair fell across her face. With a violent revulsion she flung it back. Oh, this sickening contact with herself. If she could only get away from her breath, from her own hands, from her feet that were so cold they ached! If she could fly out of this body that held her fast to the immutable yesterday.

She pulled the covers up to her eyes, stared at the redwood trees towering above the porch, stared fixedly, trying to freeze her brain against thought. She said to herself: "Oh, so many stars—" And there was nothing sad about that; nothing terrible, but it made her cry. And she kept saying: "I never saw so many stars—" cowering lower in the bed, pulling the blankets higher, calling: "God—oh, God—"

When she cried her heart turned and turned. It was a heavy thing that moaned and beat its arms. She crushed her hands about it, pleading: "Don't, oh, stop—"

It wouldn't still. In this writhing panic she wondered how long she must lie like this; if this writhing thing within her would ever stop—

Moments from the night before returned, stood at the bed, fixing her like bayonets. When she turned miserably from one, another caught her. Now it was the flushed joy in her heart an instant when she glanced upward to his face, saw it dim yet beautiful in the dark; now it was throbbing madness when he drew her head against his knees, whispering: "Our last hour—if it were, who knows? Would you then?"

They whipped her—these memories; they brought too starkly before her the hot images of herself. Oh—take them away—let her blot them out—

At last the moon, riding in a gray, chill mist, swept over the trees. It fastened itself in a vague white cloud. It put a coldness on the night; it took the radiance from the quiet, appealing stars.

It seemed to Chickie that things died; that even torment dulled in this forlorn dreariness of the morning.

She slept, not knowing the relief. It seemed that she had only turned and then a hand was on her shoulder. Then some one said: "Chickie, girl—sleep all day, are you? Isn't the lad going?"

She twisted the covers in her fists, pressed her face hard against the pillows. Jonathan's hand crushed her; Jonathan's voice opened the wildness in her mind. She said, "Don't! I'm tired—oh, Jonathan—" And it seemed to her that she would die if her father didn't stop, or if he stooped down, as he so often did, patting her cheek and kissing her. She waited, cold with fear. Now she knew that a hurt look was coming into his eyes. Now he was walking heavily to the kitchen.

She ran from the bed to the wash basin. Her eyes looked small—puffed. She dashed the water again and again against her face. She put her hair high, and pulled it down, half hiding them.

If Jennie should watch her—if Jennie should insist on sitting at the table and making her eat—

With hysterical caution she called out gayly: "Jennie, darling, rest yourself under the tree! I only want a cup of coffee. Did you leave it on the stove? Don't come in!"

And for once the self-effacing Jennie, engrossed in the cooking recipes in the paper of the previous evening, nodded absently. "All right, dear! It's on the stove."

She was so grateful for this escaped tears filled her eyes—they dropped into her coffee. That reminded her of the morning when he had argued with her, when he had said: "It won't make our love any righter, will it? It's as right as the sun—as the river flowing down here to meet the ocean. It is to me!"

Did he feel like this now? Would he come again to sit fearlessly at her side and speak this hot, reckless defiance? Was that only on his lips—a boy's love, hot and swift?

And he would put it from him? She had given too much. So he wouldn't want it now. He wouldn't care any longer. Men were like that. Oh—she knew. And perhaps it was their last hour.

Well—she would kill herself. She would never see coldness on his face.

Just thinking of this spread an alarm like a deadly poison up through her throat—down over her heart.

Go and leave her? Forget her? His white, vivid face, hers no more?

No—he couldn't—they were bound—a thousand ties—he wanted to feel them—they drew him so—

She was on fire to see him—only a glance. She would know. He wouldn't need to say a word. And craving this thing wildly, she fled from it. Oh—she would never let him see her again—

She stole from the kitchen, running by the side of the house that Jonathan, sawing logs, might not see her. She crept swiftly up the trail, hid behind bushes.

Perhaps he had left already. Perhaps he wouldn't want any further good-by. She remembered that he had put his arm about her at the porch; he had whispered: "You're glad, Chickie? Why, you're crying so! Don't—I can't leave you so—"

Maybe he meant that for the parting.

Two or three times the twigs cracked. She got to her feet—shaking. She reached out her hand. No one came.

She listened. But when finally she heard a step and knew that it was he, she sat motionless. She didn't stir. She heard his voice, anxious, demanding—"Chickie—oh, you hear me—where are you?"

Then she stood up, but she wouldn't raise her head—wouldn't look at him. He sprang to her side. His voice rasped: "Oh—didn't you hear—you frightened me."

Tears shot to her eyes, fell on her hand. And he began talking rapidly, raising her face, wiping it, kissing her lips. The seeking, tender look was in his eyes. "Chickie—is this the way you feel? You want to take it back? You're sorry?"

She couldn't speak. And he listened. "You aren't afraid! Tell me that."

She wanted to know if he was—if he loved her less. But, seeing this new, warm gentleness, she cried anew. She pleaded. "You'll love me always now? Love me, Barry? You won't forget?"

"Love you, Chickie, dear. More than ever—a thousand times!"

CHAPTER LIX

AVOWAL

IN a stillness that murmured sadly, like a faint wind blowing from the heart of pain, she listened. His words were balm on the raw anguish of her thoughts. Because of a hunger to hear them again she whispered softly, "Do you, Barry? Oh, really? More than ever?"

"Can you doubt it? How can you? Chickie, you're the only thing in the world."

Tears ached at her throat; she kept her head down. It seemed so strange that they two should stand here in the sun—a part of the glad, shiny morning. The light fell in a bright shower through the madrones, touching with gay polish the tender green of the leaves. A bluejay, with feathers spread, poised arrogantly on one leg, its wings bluer than a jewel.

And all this seemed so bonny, so like a tune flung out in joy. It was so far away from her, as though she stood on that gray waste that she had seen in a dream—as though she stood there and listened to the vast, forlorn voice of rising waters. And she must stand there always—that or a hush more dismal in her ears.

He took her hand, but she wouldn't raise her head and meet his glance. "Barry—don't—oh, let me go."

"You can't go—why are you crying so? You're sorry, are you? You'd like to take it back?"

She drew in her lips, fighting to keep them still.

He pleaded, "Won't you look at me, Chickie? Do you want me to go away now? Listen, why so sad?"

The ruddy color was floating now in his vital, impetuous face. He smiled, watching her. It was more than she could bear. She said faintly: "You're happy? Oh—you seem glad—"

"Don't you want that, Chickie? Why not? You love me—I know it. You will love me—"

"You think it's all right, then?" And seeing the smile deepen and a swift assent on his lips, a moan shook through her: "Oh, did you want this? I never dreamed—why, you don't

seem sorry! And all night long I wanted to die. I don't know, but this morning when Jonathan came and stood at my bed—oh, I'd like to die now—”

The blood sank from his face; he dropped her hands, flung along the trail, leaned against a tree. His back was turned, but he had a sagged look as though his muscles snapped suddenly.

It frightened her to hurt him so. She crept up softly and touched his arm. He didn't move. She put her hand on his.

He said, “Oh, what's the use, then, Chickie? You've said it. I guess that's how you feel.”

She didn't wish to cry, but tears came so easily. They poured down her cheeks. She hid the sight from him.

He drew her then: “Oh, Chickie, this is awful! I don't know what to do. I thought you loved me—”

She pressed her face against him. “Don't I? Why, more than my own life—how much more—oh—”

“But if you want to die—that's awful.” He said this over, clasping his hands on her shoulder, and then he began to comfort her. They loved each other—they couldn't help it—and what of it—when he'd get back it would be settled—not so long—

She wanted to smile—oh, just to please him. But her lips twisted and her chin—always like that—doubled so. She said: “Yes—yes—but, why—oh, I never dreamed. We could have waited—”

“Yes—we could have. We didn't!” He rubbed her fingers as though he were working a tight glove over them. His breath heaved. “It's done now. I never meant to—oh, honestly! When I got into that boat. . . . Listen—but now you'll blame me—oh, you'll think I planned it—came back for that—”

Working at her fingers, biting his lips: “Will you? You think that?” Suddenly he flung his arm about her, pressed his head against her shoulder, sobbing like a boy.

She reached her hand to his face: “No—I don't think that—oh, I blame myself— It seems so strange—”

After a long while they sat on a drift of leaves. He pulled crisp bark in flakes from the tree. The fields lay dreaming under a soft blue haze. A butterfly, purple and orange, balanced on a long stem of grass. The deep, fertile peace of Summer hummed like a song in the quiet and the color.

Sitting there like that reminded her of the Sundays when they had driven down the highway to their hill above the ocean

and she had felt the first tremulous joy when he caught her in his arms and kissed her.

Her eyes blinked. She wiped them. He began to plead. "You think I've hurt you, Chickie? Do you?"

She wouldn't answer, but stole her hand in his. He went on with broken, impulsive fierceness, now beseeching, now defending. "It's my fault—if you want to call it that. But I went away to avoid this. You know—being with you so much—all day, and on the river here—oh, well—

"But even so, Chickie, I can't see why you should seem so broken? Why we should be going back and trying to undo it now. It swept us. That's all there's to it. And what's so wrong about it? That's all because the world says so. You let it crush you. In your heart you can't feel that it's that wrong—can you? Won't you say anything?"

"I don't know what it is. I only know it's so—"

"But you loved me then—didn't you?"

"Oh, don't—too much—"

"But you don't now—"

"Yes—always—I can't take that—"

"And still you're going to cry about it. When I'm gone you'll think hard things of me. Right now you'd give your life to undo it, would you?"

"Oh, yes!"

He leaned mute and worn against the bank. Then he said quietly: "I didn't look at it so. Chickie, when I met you on the path last night, I had no thought of this. After we got into the boat and drifted down there in the dark I don't know what wildness drove me. But alone there and you so near and loving you all these months—oh, well—you know all that. But I wouldn't undo it—no—not a moment. Only that you feel so. I can't stand that—"

She said with a pitiful smile: "You want me to be glad, then? You think I should?"

"What do you mean by that, Chickie? Well, I do think it! That's what I think. Why should we let the blind thoughts of others put a stain on a thing that was strong and swept us so—well—me anyway— It's a kind of suicide to deny it. If we didn't love—but we do, I can't see why a few months should make such a difference."

"But are we sure, Barry? Once you said that feelings change. Suppose now—oh—"

He caught her elbows: "No, Chickie—don't say it! Don't think it. We only have an hour or so. Then I have to go. It's terrible to leave you like this!"

"Barry—just tell me—you're sure you love me? You won't change—"

"I love you—why should I be the one to change?"

"Oh—it always seems so. Especially now—men always do."

He winced: "That's cruel. No—I won't be the one. I feel nearer—a thousand times—to you. You must feel this—don't you? Chickie, dear, if you felt certain that I loved you more than anything in life and that I wouldn't change, then would you be happy again? You wouldn't look so?"

She winked her eyes that were so gray, but all misted now. She twined her hand in his. "Do you, Barry? But only say it if it's so."

"It's so! Oh, come—I feel as though I killed you."

"It will be terrible alone, Barry. And Jonathan looking at me. I don't know how I'll stand that—"

"Well, Chickie, you won't stand it if you begin to think we did some crime—oh, you shame it all—"

"Oh, no—no—you'll write to me? Every day? You won't be long?"

Then he went over his plans; then he said how the time would drag; how he'd have her always in his thought; how he'd like to take her with him—

And she listened, filling her heart with his words, her mind with his image; her eyes with the pleasing tenderness of his.

He took her face in his hands, smoothed back her hair, staring into her eyes. He said: "You're beautiful. I love you. More than ever. Chickie—do you want me to kiss you?"

"Barry!" Crying again—she wished she could lose herself in this love of his—oh, let it wrap about her—shut her from her thoughts. She held to him.

He put his cheek on hers as he had that first night when they drove to the beach. How its touch, so warm and firm, had flushed her heart with startled joy!

He kissed her lips and the gentleness pierced her so that she trembled. He murmured against them: "Then love me, Chickie. Don't blame me so. It won't be long. Oh, soon—"

Like that, again and again.

Then he was gone. Echoes of his steps crunching the leaves—echoes of his steps falling on her heart.

CHAPTER LX

ALONE

HE was gone, the impulsive ardor of his words chilling in her ears.

And in the forlorn quiet of her emotions, her spirit—shoved aside by his arms, by his tender, seeking eyes—returned. It brought back the cup he had dashed aside, forced it to her lips.

Not the thing she had done, but her own thought of it crushed her. She couldn't rise above the reluctance and the fear that were in the fiber of her flesh.

She went for a walk, racing up hills, stopping faint in the heat. It was there to meet her, holding out the cup, brimming with anguish. Each time she drained it the shock and bitterness went through her new, fresh, unsoftened.

She tried to knock it from her, repeating: "Oh, I'll not shame it so! Why—it swept us—" But she saw herself stepping from the canoe, following him—the darkness—his vivid eyes. She sank in the shrubs and began to cry.

Then she grew afraid. Every one would know. If she kept on like this even Jennie would suspect her. She went home by the spring and, kneeling on the rocks, bathed her face, dipping it under the silver trickle of water. She felt a gratitude to the earth—to this spring.

She would be gay—tease Jonathan—put her arm about Jennie. She hadn't been so kind to them these weeks—off on her own pleasure from morning till night. Now she had a wild longing to win them—make them laugh.

She went in, swinging her hat. But at her place was a bunch of sweet peas. Jonathan had done that. Now he took her chin in his hand: "Lonesome, Chickie, girl? But your dad was the gallant lover in his day. Ask your mother!"

She dropped her face down and rubbed it against his palm. Oh—if he kept doing things like this the first thing she knew he'd have her crying in his arms. Then he'd know. She'd die first. Let Jonathan know that! See the light go out of his chuckling eyes—giant that he was—

During dinner this fear came and ate at her breast. Its teeth sank in her heart. She glanced over to him, then at Jennie.

Jennie said, getting up quickly: "Oh, I forgot the sauce. Is that what you're looking for?"

"No—mother, you spoil me! No wonder I'm selfish un—" Lips shaking, she crumbled the bread. "No—why don't we go home to-morrow? I have some shopping to do and then I ought to be back at work. Janina wrote—"

Jonathan said, "Yes, we'll go. Vacation enough. What say, Jennie?"

It was decided. She went about in a restless fever, gathering her things. Green dress she had worn, rolling it into a knot, stowing it in the bottom of her trunk. Books he had given her—turning the pages, snapping them abruptly closed.

Get back to work—plunge herself into it—hammer at the typewriter till her fingers ached. Close out these hills—never look at the river again—

But the morning she dressed for the office she shivered with nervousness. She brushed her hair again and again, taking a bleak satisfaction in the roughness of her stroke. She stared a long time at her image, wondering if there was anything different in her face—some pitiless, revealing mark. She was afraid to meet Janina.

On the car she glanced furtively at other girls going to work; speculated in a kind of despairing excitement about their lives—their thoughts. Did any one but herself have a cold, trembling weight lodged remorselessly in her heart?

A smartly dressed girl with a wink in her black eyes laughed merrily, coquetting with a much older woman. The sound rang jarringly along Chickie's nerves. She opened her book, shunning the brightness. She would never be flippantly happy like that again.

But Janina met her with a refreshing vigor, and Stella Wilson put her arm about her. They told her all the news. They missed her. She looked wonderful—freckles on her nose. Lemon juice for that—Oh—she found herself laughing, too.

But when she sat at her desk and all by chance glanced across the alley, a pulsing cold went over her. Her fingers stiffened on the keys. For a long while she did no work. Lewis happened to pass. He twitted her: "Too much vacation, Miss Bryce? Or not enough?"

Her mind sharpened. For an hour she typed relentlessly and pausing to get a new piece of carbon paper, she was suddenly back on the river, paddling into the dark, feeling it close about her— All that first day terror gripped her.

That night there were letters he had written on the train—they were warm in her hand, living things breathing hotly now with impetuous fire—now gentle as he had been that last day.

Reading them, her heart took life—stirred like a soft pool of flame. Oh—he didn't want her to bow herself down. No—that was no way to look at it—that was the coward way.

"And, Chickie, remember when we've watched the ocean and sometimes a great wave rushed in resistless and bore over the rocks. Something magnificent in the power and the flash of it, isn't there? Think of it, like that, I do—"

Then again—"Suppose we were alone in the world. We are, in a way. No other can know or have a say for what we feel unless we permit it. Why should we? This is ours—ours only—keep it so, free from the touch of others' thoughts."

She read it over, poured it into her mind. Dearer than anything else was this—"I love you, Chickie. I think I did even the first day I saw you, as I've told you, sitting up there like a blessed thing. Now I know what you're thinking. Don't think it. You are more beautiful by far than you were before. Write to me—tell me what you are thinking. I love you."

Like a sanction. She took it as though his hand reached to her, led her away. And they were alone and she was glad.

In the middle of the night she read the letters again. She cried over them. He loved her so. He thought of it as a magnificent wave, flashing, resistless.

She tried to focus this image of beauty on her mind—look at it that way. Little things made it shift, made it fade; Janina saying to her: "Well, proud and pure, how goes it? Do I step to the altar with the vestal soon?"

And then one afternoon she came home a little early and found Jennie sitting in the living-room on the small, old-fashioned sofa. Jennie had a white celluloid box with silver corners in her lap. She was going over her trinkets, sorting them. This was a favorite pastime. Now she blushed, saying to Chickie: "I have some pins here that need repairing."

Chickie knew that her mother was merely fondling these old relics—that she was going back to her girlhood. Jonathan had given her this jewel box with a brooch of carved abalone shell

the first week they were married. Now the faded, wistful look in Jennie's eyes caught her with a pang. Suddenly she was aware that she had neglected her mother. She was just "sweet Jennie" as she carefully mended Chickie's silk stockings—as she ironed frilly waists and laid them with anxious pride on Chickie's bed.

Now, looking at the mild, round face with the old dreams still showing, seeing tears in Jennie's eyes, Chickie had a wish to sit on the little sofa, put her head down on Jennie's ample breast—sleep, till she, too, was old with faded eyes.

Old like that—oh, sweet—then she would forget—

Jennie asked her to run down to the bakery—get some of those little rolls. Jonathan liked them.

As she was hurrying back she stopped abruptly half way down the block. Too late. Jimmy saw her and was all but running to meet her.

He looked jaunty—new blue suit—little pink bud on his coat. Jimmy looked handsome—big fellow, grinning. "Where do you get this stuff, Miss Bryce—take a step and salute your old darling."

She said, trembling: "Why, Jimmy—get a raise—all dolled up?"

"Like me, Chickie? New suit for the new car! Oh, we're sporty. Say, how about stepping forth with your old love to-night? My private sleuth tells me you have no date. Aw, please, Chickie—like old times—"

And he had hold of her elbow, driving his fingers against it.

Almost beside herself, her breath failing, she said: "Oh—why, Jimmy—well, you see—"

And then Jimmy stooped down and looked her square in the face. He said brusquely: "Do you mean that you won't, Chickie? You won't take a ride with me—not that much?"

She laughed, wild with fear, ready to die rather than this. But she said: "Why, of course! Of course I will!"

CHAPTER LXI

DISSEMBLANCE

SHE closed the alleyway gate softly and stood a moment fingering the buds of a pink climbing rose. There was a blazing at her throat. She must quiet it.

Going out with Jimmy—sitting next to him in the new car—laughing like old times—Jimmy thought she was an angel. His frank, boy's face danced when she said: "Oh—why, of course I'll go—"

Kind it is that the heart lies under the flesh and none may see its wounds. Chickie felt that she would push hers down and down; she would stamp it to death rather than Jimmy should see.

But as she was putting on her coat that evening she remembered suddenly Jimmy saying: "If I thought you were treating these fellows to any petting parties I'd lie around here and knock their blocks off—"

Her skin burned scarlet; tears sprang to her eyes. She mumbled bitterly: "Oh, I suppose Jimmy never has! Very likely!" If any one else had said this to her a week ago she would have flashed against them hotly, the mere thought would have hurt so scathingly her young ideals. But now she wished passionately that Jimmy should be no better than the ninety-nine others.

Once, long ago, when she had been so captivated with Janina's pertness, she and Jimmy had conferred about this very thing. She wanted to know if it were true that only one in ten of all the men on earth were faithful. Jimmy had roared, reminding her, "There's always the tenth, you know."

She had said: "But who can be sure of finding the tenth?"

His eyes all black with excitement, he answered: "My girl, Chickie!" A little while after that he asked her to marry him—nearly four years—

But four years—a long time, and Jimmy earning \$300 a month now and having this neat car for himself? Or perhaps he has changed in his thought as well—

He ran her down the steps, saying with a grin: "Gee, this is

good. Now look her over. Say—I might teach you to drive some night when you're lonesome."

He shot a quick, eager glance at her face. It turned crimson. When they were speeding along Dolores he said, with his teasing persistence: "Didn't like that, did you? But I see you have nights off now and then. Where's the Red-head these days?"

"In New York—"

"And you don't want to cheat, do you? Even to take a ride in your brother's car? Engaged, Chickie?"

She answered flippantly: "Any old time and I so young and that capricious!"

"Keep that up, Chickie! When you're a sweet old maid, darling Jimmy is coming to pluck you off! You'll see!"

He kept teasing and chuckling at her and telling her openly all his bright prospects. How easy it was at home now and gee—"mother got a kick out of the car—darn glad she didn't have to wait too long—"

Chickie sank back and let a friendly peace, warm with tears, steal through her. Why, she didn't need to worry. In a thousand years Jimmy would never dream this thing of her.

Abruptly he said: "Well, how's that Pole dame that used to dispense wisdom to the innocents? Still trying to open your eyes?"

Chickie gave a little edgy laugh: "Oh, indeed! A hard-boiled woman of the world like myself, Jimmy!"

"You!"

But she plunged on recklessly, wanting suddenly to hear Jimmy's thoughts; aching that he might say: "Oh, well—times are different—what of a few things!" She said: "I thought Janina so crude then—now I know she merely told the truth."

"Oh—you do!" Black brows scowling. "Where did you learn all that, Chickie?"

"Don't be silly! As though a person can work four years and not see things—"

He drew a breath of relief: "Well—but look here, Chickie—those things you see are only a small part of the picture—"

Inwardly trembling, she interrupted with a faint: "But, Jimmy, so many girls don't seem to care. Perhaps it's not so terrible?"

He flung his fist down against her. No sound came from his tightened lips. Finally he said: "I didn't mean that, Chickie."

You gave me such a start. You don't want to say a thing like that—humph—look here, Chickie, you don't know what you're talking about."

She laughed, turning her head sharply: "So darling Jimmy beats me up to enlighten me?"

He said: "Gee, you're pale—what's the matter? Did I frighten you?"

"You did!" And craftily, "Why did you grow so angry? Think sweet Chickie might have wicked wiles in her head?"

"Jealous, Chickie! I hate even that you know these things. Because they are terrible—and the worst of it is that girls to-day are blinding themselves. They won't look at it square. They take a squint that only shows the present. You can't do that. That's the tragedy."

All along her skin went a little sickening quiver—hot—faint. She was afraid. Her voice kept on talking, growing merry. The weight in her heart swelled. She almost jumped with relief when Jimmy said: "I suppose you want to go home now? Look tired, Chickie!"

"Working hard, Jimmy love."

"Some day you won't! Laugh! I'll show you. I've made up my mind for it. So there!"

When she went into the room she didn't switch the lights. She knelt at her window, leaning against the ledge. The sweet peas made her faint with their perfume.

Jimmy—he never guessed—not for a moment. Why had she talked so? Insane to do that—

And she began to imagine that all the world would know what she had done. They would see it in her eyes. They would think it frightful, as Jimmy did.

But was it—when you love? When you couldn't seem to help it? When it rose up, resistless, and swept you into the dark—swept you clear from your thoughts—

Oh—let him hurry up and come back—let him put his arms about her—she could rest. They loved—they had the right—

Yet the desire to hear some one say this; to tell her: "You did right! Don't be a fool. How can a thing be frightful now and be sacred a few months from now? Look at it coldly!" This desire took feverish possession of her.

Saturday she went to tea with Janina at the St. Francis. She had her opportunity.

At the table next them were a dozen children, the oldest girl, at most, fourteen, the others ten and twelve. The table was brilliant with flowers; the guests in their radiant youngness like smart, winsome dolls. Janina bowed to a sunny-haired, slender mite. She shrugged to Chickie:

"Five or six years from now when their gentle mothers are tearing their hair because the baby flappers are rushing to ruin, I'm going to stand at Lotta's Fountain and yell: 'Well, who started them! Making them bored little prigs with the pleasures of twenty at ten. Sure they'll empty the cup at twenty! You gave it to them for a sip before they were out of rompers!'"

Chickie laughed: "But, Janina, you believe in emptying the cup."

"I don't deny it, do I? I don't sit back in complacent staleness and whimper because the world's gone to smash. They do and they start it. As for me, I like the wreck. I can swim."

"You mean you can talk, Janina. If you really did the things you say, you'd be crushed by them."

"Chase yourself! Do I look flat? Or feel flat?"

"Because you only talk."

"I thank you, baby, for the sweet commendation. Rule me out, then. Does our friend Amy Heaton have a pale and tortured look?"

"Well—who really knows about her—"

"Oh, nobody! Diamonds grow on hedges! She carries a valise on Saturday mornings just to keep her hands busy. She takes the two o'clock boat for Mill Valley every week-end just to hike! In high heels and \$5 hose! And she lives in an apartment alone—that is sometimes—that costs \$85 a month; she has a different fur for every outfit; never wears a stocking that costs under \$3.50. But she earns \$125 a month. Tell me how, ole dear. I'm some crafty shopper myself. I couldn't make that grade—not on my own—"

"Not many girls are like that?"

"No—Amy comes high—an expensive one—"

"You don't think there's anything terrible in it?"

"You bore me to extinction with your hand-me-down platitudes! Why is it terrible for a woman and not worth noting in a man? Can you tell me that? No, pink and pure, you can't! I'll tell you—it's just that the minds of people are educated to

accepting it in the Lords of Creation. They may stray as they will, but, let us budge off the chalk-line, and they'll run the scarlet flash down our back!

"At least they used to, but times are changed. Look at the novels of the last century—look at poor Hester Prynne and Hetty Sorrel. But to-day we have 'Lillian,' 'Ann Veronica' and 'The Pretty Lady.' That shows it—all in the way you look at it. No worse for us than for a man. We've found it out!"

Chickie drank this as though it were a life draught. She wanted more of this drug. Put her spirit to sleep; hush its tormenting voice. Oh, why not? The world is free.

CHAPTER LXII

BARRY'S RETURN

CHICKIE was like one with a raw gash on her arm. It hurt her so, she was impelled to stop now this one, now that, seeking some anodyne to kill its pain.

When she spoke to Jimmy, all unaware he struck his hand across the wound. Now Janina dropped ointment. She took it with a pitiful eagerness—asking more.

Janina, sitting opposite, cool and handsome, insisted calmly that she did the things Jimmy considered so "terrible." Yet Janina puffed a cigarette, blowing the smoke with delicious satisfaction, exulting in every breath life gave her. She was not crushed. Indeed not!

Chickie said with elaborate indifference: "Makes it nice for pretty ladies, doesn't it? Only why do they need to do it?"

"What do you mean need?"

Pretending to smile at the youngsters who were now clapping their hands as an immense birthday cake was brought to their table: "Well, there's still such a thing as marriage, isn't there? They could wait for that, couldn't they?"

A mocking laugh: "Yes, like dear ole Stella did! Marriage, my dear, is a luxury the gods do not give to all. Not enough men to go around and not enough of what there are, inclined to the holy state."

Janina's lips curled with sardonic humor. "One way you look at it, isn't convention a vicious thing? It's a matter of actual statistics that women far outnumber men. So some of the best get left. Take Stella for example. Now she'd make a peach of a mother and you know how wild she is for kids. Along comes some pretty nonentity and grabs off the man Stella had staked out as her own.

"Now, I ask you—is it anything but vicious to shove poor ole Stella into the frigid zone and shout at her: 'Stay there! You get left.' And would any one but a boob like this same Stella heed such an order?"

Chickie's own problem was too sore and too pressing. She

was not interested in Stella. She said: "But when two people each love, Janina, there's not much reason why they shouldn't wait for marriage, is there?"

"Might be a thousand reasons why they'd be fools to wait. Love doesn't always wait on circumstance, you know. But why ask me? I'm beyond the pale! Marriage hasn't been anything in my young life."

"Has love, Janina? You've never really told me. You mean now that you loved and you thought you had the right?"

Janina's strong, brilliant face paled as it did when she was suddenly and deeply moved. After a pause she said bitingly: "Being rather primitive, ole dear, I didn't wait to ponder the right and the wrong."

Excitement rose swift and hot to Chickie's throat. She said eagerly: "Oh, it's swept you?"

"I'll say it did!"

"Afterwards were you sorry?"

"I'm not sorry now and I wasn't then."

"Not at all? Not even in the very beginning?" Unconsciously Chickie leaned forward, her eyes glittered.

Janina regarded her with hard amusement: "Why so interested in this recital of crudeness and wrong, little one?"

Chickie stammered, flushing painfully: "It wasn't crude at all, then. And when you love a person, I suppose it makes a difference, doesn't it?"

"Usually happens that way. All young and trustful once, you know."

"Do you mean that you were to be married and then something happened? Oh, that must be dreadful!"

"Maybe I had a sneaking hope of that, though marriage didn't enter much into the consideration. Well—it was quite some time ago—"

An odd softness crept into the clear, incisive voice: "Know why I'm telling this to you, angel face? Well, I'm fond of you. And I hate contempt! Even though it gives me an ache and I can see the fool hypocrisy of it."

"Oh, I don't feel contempt for you, Janina."

"You have."

"No—but just the same I can't understand how you could do it and not feel sorry even now."

Janina's shoulder raised scornfully: "Leave it to the good people to burn with remorse. My kind of love doesn't meas-

ure its giving. It doesn't come creeping afterward and try to snatch it back. What I did I wanted to do. That's all there was to it!"

"Weren't you afraid the man might think less of you afterward?"

"Oh, that mid-Victorian stuff! What is a man, anyway, that he should scorn us because we have the same feelings he considers so imperious and right in himself? But that's the meanness of women—petty things dependent on the attitude of others. If a fellow thinks less of a girl when he knows she loves him, he's a cad and it's a darn sight better to find him out than to marry him—"

"But it must have hurt terribly, Janina, when it was over?"

"And I suppose it hurts a woman who is married when she looks out the window some dreamy morning and sees love flashing out of sight. Marriage can't give any guarantee that the emotion will last. It only agrees to perpetuate the blunder in case there's been a mistake. What's the odds? As for me, I'll say it's worth the hurt—any hurt!"

A thrill of admiration ran up from Chickie's heart. Big to feel like that—fearless. Oh, Janina wouldn't shame a thing with regrets. She wouldn't look back and want to snatch it to herself again. Give freely, gladly—proudly—that was the way.

That evening she grabbed up his letters from the hall rack. With the first impulse of happiness she had felt since his going she hurried into her room and read them. Like the others—full of impulsive youth. He missed her so. She dwelt in his thoughts—drew them with longing. He kept seeing her eyes, so sad that day. Don't have them so! Why—and they loved each other. They would be together soon.

She raised her head—smiled. Well—

But the day he was coming—and sent a wire that she was to meet him—a wild nervousness possessed her. She kept running into the dressing room, putting pins in her hair, taking them out, combing the whole thing over. His train was due at one o'clock at the Oakland pier. Lewis gave her the afternoon off.

Janina dropped a note on her desk: "Is your wandering boy coming home, baby? Don't worry, angel face; you look a dream. For the love of heaven don't do any more fussing with that phiz of yours! Give him my love—it's free!"

She reached the pier twenty minutes before his arrival. Yet she kept rushing up to the time-table, scanning it. She asked the gate man which track the train from New York would take, and she ran over and strained her eyes down its length.

When finally she heard its whistle, she hung back and when it came, black and chugging into the yards, she was afraid to move. Suddenly she saw him. First one to come swinging to the steps. He glanced about with feverish intensity—up and down—not seeing her. A look of blank, incredulous disappointment like a powdering of chalk overspread his face.

Then she raised her hand—took a few hurried steps. And he saw. Her heart opened with joy. He laughed—he ran up and caught her in his arms—kissed her—and again, not caring that others might see—were looking.

He said: "Chickie—miss me?"

She looked before her—eyes filled.

"You got my letters?"

She nodded.

"Oh, look up and smile, won't you!"

She did. She laughed full in his face and she stole her hand under his.

They sat like that riding home on the boat. She found him watching her with eager, seeking eyes. He said, pressing her fingers: "Chickie, happy?"

"Yes—I am now."

"And you will be—from now on."

CHAPTER LXIII

ENTANGLEMENTS

"You haven't changed, Barry?"

"Chickie—"

She glanced upward, and finding his eyes reaching down to hers—it seemed so glorious that they should have that warm look for her—she wondered how she had been sad. The weight in her heart lightened. It melted. She was carried along in a song. Only that he was here—only that he looked at her and was glad.

They went to lunch. For a long while she only wanted to hear him say he'd missed her; it was awful being so far away; he'd not go again unless she came along. Then to have his face flush as he whispered how pretty she was. She would have listened to this for hours.

Almost grudgingly she asked, "What happened, Barry?"

"Well, a free trip to New York. That's about all."

"Oh! Nothing else? Then you didn't get it? It's not settled? But, why—"

"It will be. Now don't get panic-stricken. Listen—they can't stall the thing forever. It was all cooked when Moore wired. They were to run a line of steamers to the coast. That would have made it great for me. I'd get a salary and a fee for every case that came up. But the backers got cold feet because the shipping has taken a slump. That can't last very long, you know. Things are picking up right now. I'll get the job all right, but there'll be nothing to it till they open the coast line—"

He dashed into it breathless, a white, anxious look on his mouth. She clasped her hands tightly, lowered her eyes. She said nothing.

He leaned toward her dubiously: "Chickie, listen—there are other things. Lord, you don't suppose I'll have to grub along like this very much longer, do you?"

When she couldn't answer because of a parched ache in her throat, he said resentfully: "You think I don't care, Chickie? You think it's my fault?"

"No—oh, no—but how long may it be, Barry?"

He reached across the table and touching her hand suddenly, forced her eyes to his. Their fervor startled her. "Chickie—how long—ask—well—"

"You mean—?" She began to smile.

"Yes! I've said it enough. You ought to know by this time!"

And because his forehead reddened, a flush that was pain and rapture went stealing softly through her thought. She laughed: "Perhaps he loves me?"

"Perhaps he does!"

In this way, without either of them being aware, they drew themselves in a thousand eager ties. Their separation but quickened and intensified the bond between them.

She was surprised because of the peace that came upon her. She spoke of it that night when they drove out along the Embarcadero, parking in the dark quiet of Fisherman's wharf. Small boats, hundreds of them, lay along the pier. A man, looking like a gnome, appeared and disappeared.

But on the bay was a vast, hushed tranquillity; vessels moving in silence, opening the waters with odd, golden lights; clouds sweeping over the far hills rhythmically in a mighty, elemental symphony.

She leaned against his shoulder, her eyes wet. "Barry, now I don't feel troubled. Isn't that strange?"

He pressed her hands. She went on in a dreamy languor: "Why do you think it is? Just because you're here again?"

"Maybe. Or it might be because here we seem removed from the world. We're alone and only hills and water about. We only need to think of ourselves and this beauty. If it were like this always, you would never be troubled."

"I wish we could shut the world out then! Just the two of us."

"We can."

She laughed: "What a big wall of love we'd have to build—"

"Not so big, Chickie—but brave. And that's what we have to do. Because otherwise it will be a wall of reproaches and resentments against each other. No love can cut through that. If you let yourself be pressed down; if you keep thinking that we've hurt each other—well—you can see what will happen. Lord, we don't want that!"

She clung to him. "No—oh, I could never bear that—you won't let that happen? You keep me from that, will you, Barry?"

He kissed her. She put up her hand and felt his eyes wet. A trembling joy stirred in her heart. She was the eternal woman justified in her giving because the man was faithful. His love was a sacrament that cleared her mind of the long heritage of reluctance. It championed the freedom she had snatched and that her thought had never sanctioned. It freed her from herself but only that she might be more wholly his.

It seemed to Chickie in those first weeks after his return that the world was indeed shut out. They two were alone, running irresistibly to each other on the crest of lighted waves.

She sat at her window and smiled. He came from the shadow and pursed his lips. They hurried into the alley at five o'clock, walking to the car together. At night they drove out to the beach or about the hills. Sometimes they went dancing. When he held her, she felt his heart thump and her own quivered as though to some piercing music, unbearable in its sweetness.

Sundays there were long, Indian summer hours under the tree that watched the ocean. They lost themselves in this growing, intoxicating sense of possession one in the other.

And she had no longer the tormenting sense of fear. Once when Janina taunted, "Well, baby—how much longer do I wait for the great and glorious procession?" she answered with light flippancy: "Second Tuesday of next week, Janina dear!"

At home, this easy assurance left her. She didn't wish to be alone with Jonathan. She hid from the tenderness of his eyes. Once when he ran his palm under her chin, saying with a chuckle: "Pretty as an angel, isn't she, mother?" she ran out of the room, completely unnerved.

Yet she turned to Jennie. She was all at once concerned because there were wrinkles on the bland forehead. She was curious about her mother. Sometimes she wished to say: "Jennie, darling—listen—if you loved—oh, the way you did—well—" But even in her thought she dared not put that question to Jennie.

One night her mother was mending her stocking as she often did. Chickie said: "That's finished—don't bother with it. I wouldn't wear a thing all runs like that—"

But Jennie answered, "Well, you may get a turn out of it on a rainy day."

"No—throw it out!"

The next evening she helped with the dishes, hovering about the mild Jennie. She watched the hair falling in thin strands from the amber comb. She saw little beads of perspiration on her mother's neck. It made her sad.

Then Jennie stooped and mopped some water from the floor. As she did this Chickie saw the silk stockings she had ordered thrown out. Jennie was wearing them.

A pang shot through her. Jennie wearing her discarded finery. Jennie, too, must like the feel of silk next to her skin. She felt a sudden, overpowering tenderness for her mother.

They were alike—loved the same things—had the same weakness. She had never thought of this before—never worried much about Jennie's longings.

Noon the next day she bought a gift—two pairs of gray and two of black. Jennie stammered and didn't at all want to take them. When Chickie insisted she blushed like a girl. "Why, whatever made you think of this, Chickie dear? And for an old woman like me?" Yet she was so touched tears ran into her eyes.

Chickie said gayly: "Jennie, darling, why I never thought you'd like them so. Why didn't you say something about it? Why, after this I shall buy sweet Jennie a lipstick, and she shall go a-waltzing with me!"

Jennie cried.

Doing little things like this was a kind of absolution Chickie gave herself. It freed her as the clasp of his arms or as his laughter.

She loved him most when he was happiest; when he grew daring and said: "Chickie, let the world go hang! We should worry! Only thee and me!"

It was like that one Sunday when she had left the house in a state of nervous unrest because Jonathan said: "Chickie, I don't like this—it's not fair to the lad or to yourself. You see too much of each other."

The slightest thing distressed her. She said: "Barry—if Jonathan should know—"

But he shrugged and whistled. Then he pulled her down and rattled in her ear the childhood song from Coleridge: "Chickie, listen—"

“Do you know what the birds say? The sparrow, the dove,
The linnet, and thrush say, “I love and I love!”
In the winter they’re silent—the wind is so strong;
What it says I don’t know, but it sings a loud song.
But green leaves, and blossoms, and sunny warm weather,
And singing, and loving, all come back together.
And the lark is so brimful of gladness and love,
The green fields below him, the blue sky above,
That he sings and he sings, and forever sings he—
I love my love and my love loves me!”

She laughed and forgot. In these moods he dominated her. Oh—he had only to glance—only to speak, she would follow wherever he led. She would give and give. Her spirit was no longer her own.

They were plunged into these endearments—more than half helpless—he as well as she. A kind of wild love—young, unreckoning. All they did drew the bond between them tighter, more relentless.

CHAPTER LXIV

APPREHENSION

THEY were going to the Abbots'. Bess was giving a house party. They entered the road winding upward over the slope into the cool retreat of eucalyptus and oak. Autumn, red-berries coming—peace, that seemed half sadness, settling quietly on the trees.

Chickie felt it with an undue sensitiveness. She moved a little nearer, touched his arm. "Barry, remember last year when we came up here? Oh, how we felt! So merry! What a long time a year is!"

He stooped swiftly and kissed her. "What a sweet time a year is! Melancholic, frail? Why?"

She answered, laughing: "You kissed me like that then—oh, it startled me!"

"It was farther down, before we hit this road—out in the open."

"Yes. Barry, are you as happy as you were?"

"Only more so."

"All the time? Sometimes you're quiet. Then I keep wondering what you are thinking. And perhaps you're sorry?"

She watched his face aching. She did this often now. If he were tired or silent she thought with a stab of fright: "Does he love me now? Does he care as much? Oh, maybe he wants it all ended!" With the cruel, pathetic dependence of the woman who loves, she fancied each change in his expression due to some shortcoming in her.

He was aware of this. It troubled him. Now, he said: "I'm not sorry, Chickie. You imagine things. Don't do that. It's only you that keeps harking back. You're doing it now. Why, Chickie? How can you feel so? Can't you see how that hits me? As though I'd robbed you—taken what you didn't want to give—"

"Oh, no! It's just that I haven't enough—I wish I had more and more to give you! You don't know how I wish that—"

This was true. Having given, she would have poured herself out like a wine for him to drink.

It was also true that she could look back to the time when she had not given, with a regret that made the tears rush. Often she saw herself as she had been—blithe, careless thing with a "Pooh, I should worry!" coming so flippantly to her lips. She looked to that other Chickie often and with an infinite, envious yearning.

Especially now—coming here where, a year ago, she had been so gayly confused; so thrilled to her finger tips by the happy abandon of all these bright young people so like and so unlike herself.

She was in this mood of piercing wistfulness when they came up the driveway and Nance, the irrepressible twin, bounded down to meet them, flinging her arms about Chickie's neck, with an effusive: "Oh, you honey dear, I've been waiting to see you! And you're nice. Red—same one. My, aren't you constant! Every one else has a change!"

Barry said: "Well, Nance, how about it? Would you change an' you had the best what was?"

Nance squeezed Chickie's arm: "Now that's my idea of a sheik for you! Go along, Red, take the same room as before. Chickie and I have much to converse of. She may tell me a few things I've need to learn!"

She led Chickie to the room with the French windows and the deep balcony with its ladders of red and white roses—last bloom of the year. She said gayly: "Such a much as I've to tell you. And I want to ask things, too. I've planned this conversation, honey love, for quite a while. Nobody can talk to Bess. Poor thing—she's so tired and so delicate. And of course Marge doesn't register above the neck. Did you know that? It's my conclusion—"

As Chickie dressed she rattled on in this strain, half eager—half pathetic. "Well, you know Marge is engaged again—the third time since you were here before. Now, that isn't right, do you think? I told her so. We had a big fight over it. Because, you see, we're getting old enough to have sense now. Going on eighteen. Marge said she was a free soul. She grabbed that from Janka—only Janka knows what she means and Marge doesn't! And Marge is writing free verse now about love and the grand passion and what she has discovered of men. Oh, it's awful rot. Marge says that's because I

don't understand what she talks about. But I do. Anyway, I'm pretty worried—now what would you do?"

Chickie was bending down putting on her slipper. Nance sat on a low stool, her slender arms wrapped about her knees; the brown, curly bobbed head raised appealingly. The young girl radiance of her touched Chickie as it might a much older woman. She said, laughing: "Do you mean about Marge and her loves?"

"Yes—because it's not love at all—and it's much worse than petting or flirting. I do that a little myself but I don't think Marge ought to go in for things like this. She's getting sulkier and sulkier and it's awful having a twin like this. But she says it's still a man's world we live in and the only way for a girl to get by is to be free like men and do the things they do and not care a snap about any little things. She says she means to know and taste everything because that's life. And I should do the same or I'll find myself hanging on a withered hickory tree. But I don't believe that, do you? Now you ought to tell me because I'll bet all kinds of men have made love to you. So what do you think?"

Chickie said, regarding her with nervousness and amusement: "Well, it's not true at all, Nance. You just keep your own ideas."

"And I won't find myself dangling from an old, dead tree?"

"Indeed you won't. But Marge may, because she's trifling with love, and we shouldn't do that. And she doesn't know what she's talking about."

The eager young face brightened. Nance came over and swept an arm about Chickie. "I knew you'd feel like this. You believe in love, don't you? I just know it. That nice Red of yours! I love him—so gallant, saying that clever thing about you being the best what was! Chickie, do you think some one will love Nance like that some day?"

It affected Chickie piercingly—brought her feelings in a warm tumult over her. She said haltingly: "Of course, Nance. And I'd wait for it if I were you."

Nance kissed her. "You sweet honey-love! All right! Because I want real love and not just excuses for things!"

"What is real love, Nance? Do you know?"

Nance wrinkled her chin impishly. "Like yours, Chickie. But no one else who comes here has it—that's true! I know."

She wondered why that made her tremble—why it made her glad.

But it did. When they went into the dance hall that night and he caught her with a sudden laugh, saying, "Dance, frail! Look up—here!" and she found his face flushing, she lowered her head against him. She whispered, "Don't! You're bold!"

But she was swept as completely as the night a year ago when he said for the first time, "Chickie—I love you." Swept and content.

That night late they were standing on the balcony, hidden by the roses. They looked down into the gardens and saw couples walking about—some coming from machines—others entering the house, going softly down the long halls.

From the room below the music stole up gently—a touch of loneliness singing in the silence. She said: "Barry, I came and stood here a year ago—remember?"

"Remember what? That we had wandered down to the pool?"

"Yes—but not that—remember we were so astonished—and when I came back here I couldn't sleep. I loved you so—"

"And now, Chickie—you care more, don't you?"

"If I could—"

And they were talking like that. He sat on the rail. The moon dropped a long shaft of silver through the trees. He pulled her to him. She whispered: "It's very late—"

"You want me to go—"

"No—never—but you'll have to—I'm always afraid—"

"Of what, Chickie?"

"I don't know. Barry, it's different with us than with these others here? Isn't it?"

"Of course!"

She laughed: "Yes—even Nance could see it—"

They forgot these others—they were shut out from them.

And suddenly came a banging at the door of the room. She sprang to her feet. He held her hand.

Marge called out thickly: "Chickie! Oh—busy!"

In a blaze of indignation she flew into the room, flung the door open. Marge was going down the hall, laughing, banging at every door. A young man, muttering foolishly, followed her.

And there was Nance, eyes flaming. She came into the

room. She caught Chickie's hand. She said: "Don't mind her—"

Chickie couldn't answer. She was suddenly cowed. Was Nance going to stay? Would she walk out to the porch? For a moment she thought she was going to faint.

CHAPTER LXV

DETECTED?

BUT Nance said with a sigh: "Well, moonlight may be sweet, but moonshine isn't! Behold a mixture of the two staggering down the hall. Did she frighten you?"

"A little. The noise did. I was out on the balcony."

Nance stood on her toes, whispering in Chickie's ear: "Dreaming of him?"

"Perhaps! What else?"

"Good night, then—dream on!"

Chickie closed the door softly. Her hands shook. She stood there so long that presently she saw his form coming toward her.

"What's the matter? What happened? Why are you waiting in here?"

She answered faintly: "Oh, I don't know. I was afraid Nance might stay—might go out there."

"What if she did?"

"Well—" and suddenly the muscles of her throat tightened. "Well, it's late—she might think—"

His cheeks blanched. "What might she think—"

She answered hotly: "Well—the room here—and both of us—"

She could feel him stiffen; feel the flashing resentment. He stared at her coldly. She said, weakly: "Barry—don't look at me so!"

He drew a deep, rasping breath. "Chickie, this is awful. This is detestable. Making a problem and a shame of every breath we draw! I can't stand this! Lord, can't we sit on a balcony that opens onto half the rooms in the house without your getting frightened into a faint if any one sees us?"

"Barry, don't! It was just the sudden banging on the door. It was Nance coming in like that—so late. Oh, I wouldn't want her to think things—not of us!"

He walked back to the balcony, sat morose and silent on the rail. She followed, put her hands in his, saying childishly, "I couldn't help it, Barry."

"Well—but why do you want to torture yourself? Listen, Chickie—why should Nance think things because we sit on this porch? And why are you always fearing what other people think? You make me feel that in your heart you're blaming me—always, I can't stand that!"

"It's not true! Oh, you don't think that—kiss me. I haven't room in my heart to hold its love. Where would the blame be?"

"In your mind—in your thought."

She laughed. "An idiot like me? Don't be silly. Look, you make tears run down my nice pink cheeks—"

He said somberly, "But if you're going to crush out all the joy of it—"

"No, no—you know I don't—there—please—" She took his face in her hands and kissed him. He pulled her to him, laughing.

"Well, I guess you don't!"

Yet this fear of detection which she sometimes showed made him uneasy, gave him moments of chill discomfort that at times mounted to a sharp resentment. He fancied he saw in Chickie's eyes a gentle, wordless reproach. It was a torment to him.

She said to him now, softly: "Barry, when I'm with you and you put your arms around me, nothing matters. Isn't that strange? Oh, I wish it could be this way always. I wish it could be soon."

"I wish that, too, Chickie."

"But it's just the same—no nearer?"

"It has to be nearer. I don't know. If you mean about the steamers, that's no nearer—well—"

"Never mind, we don't care! You love me very much, Barry?"

He held her in silence. After a while he said: "But, Chickie, we can't let the situation get the best of us. If we let a hundred little things prey on us—well—you can see how that will end—"

She stopped his mouth with her lips: "We won't—we'll never do that. Barry—you won't let that happen—no—oh, I won't ever be bothered again—"

But that night she dreamed. And in her sleep her fears walked stark. She heard the banging on the door, then Janina flinging it open with a derisive cry: "Ho, pink and pure!"

And Janina stood in the arch, her hands clapped to her hips, her head thrown back, shouting with crude laughter.

She sat up in bed, a wild fluttering at her throat. Gradually the strange room, the balcony, with its hanging rose trees, outlined in the dim moonlight. She remembered, sank back on the pillows trembling.

But when she slept the dream returned. This time it was Jake. He passed before her, the rich, handsome face flashing cynically. He stooped down and whispered in her ear: "You, too, Chickie! Well—"

He came a second time, but with an awful sadness in his eyes. He said: "I wouldn't have done this, Chickie—an old dog like Jake—not to you—"

She awakened. She had cried in her sleep.

But when the morning came she remembered only what Barry had said: "If we go on like this, Chickie—if we let a hundred things prey on us—well—you can see where that will end—"

She wouldn't! No. Brush everything away—worthless. Only him—make him glad—bind him to her—keep him—

It seemed to her then that if Nance should know—Janina—Jake—she could turn to them all coolly, saying: "Well—what about it?" And she would take Barry's hand and follow him boldly to the ends of the earth.

She felt brave then and during all that day of happiness and laughter. That night, too, when they drove homeward through the hills and she marked again the line of trees marching soldier-like high on the distant peak. Tall, aspiring things. Here they had stopped a year ago because he wanted so to hear that she truly loved him—that it was he—a red head, and not just the music, the moonlight, the dancing.

She grew flushed and warm in this remembered joy. She wondered if he, too, were thinking. Oh—she wished he would say a word to show it. She wanted to ask: "Barry—next year—well, do you think we may be riding here and happier?" But no—not that—as though she were afraid—

Suddenly he stopped the car, slumped down in the seat, pulling her to him with a buoyant: "Hello, dear! As much as last year? Say it!"

"More—but do you? That's the important thing—"

"Why—"

"It's always the man—always—who ceases—"

He laughed: "I think that's because the wimmin wish it on us. Don't!"

"Oh—I'm not going to! I've made up my mind for that. Barry—I think I could fight the world to-night—"

"To-morrow, too?"

"Any day—every day—"

And she was sure of it. It is so easy to meet the world and conquer it in these piercing moments of sublime strength; to fling it from us with a careless sweep of thought. But the world coming with its hosts of drab, hectoring monotonies is a different foe to vanquish.

Coming home early one afternoon the following week, Chickie noticed as soon as she stepped into her room the faint, refreshing odor of lavender. In an excitement she dashed over to her bureau, opened the drawer where the treasured bridal set was hidden. Here, too, were all his letters.

In the bottom of the drawer was a thin pad of pale pink sateen. It was filled with lavender. Jennie had done this. Yes—to surprise her. Jennie had seen the exquisite things tucked so zealously from the mild eyes.

A letter lay open. It seemed to her, glancing at it then that the words stood out—blazoned—written in fire: "Chickie, dear, don't let it press you down. Don't let the thoughts of others shame it. Remember that wave flashing, magnificent, sweeping over the rock? Think of it like that—"

Had Jennie read that? Oh, no! she wouldn't. But then—why it may have stared at her as it did now—

Chickie knelt on the floor shaking—a hand of flame tightening on her heart.

Some one pattering across the room—Jennie. Shy, uncertain, sitting on the edge of the bed, clasping the plump hands over the starched white apron. The mild blue eyes narrowed and anxious.

Oh—that must mean that Jennie knew! Chickie was afraid to turn—afraid to say the slightest word—afraid to glance at her mother—little Jennie—

And all her fears went now like mad things, biting through her.

CHAPTER LXVI

SECURITY

THE moments passed with hot, leaden feet. Jennie knew what she had done! Oh, she was sure of it. She could feel her mother's eyes—feel her own blood going in a red burn up to her temples.

Then Jennie spoke. "You're angry, Chickie? Why, you love sweet lavender—"

Chickie burst out laughing, shrill, high. "Oh, you funny little thing, Jennie, darling! Angry—well—" and she pulled up the pad and pressed it against her face, almost mad with relief. Know? Why, Jennie hadn't the remotest idea!

She went over and ran her hand along the plump neck, took out the amber comb and tucked up Jennie's stray locks. She pressed her soft cheek against her mother's, whispering: "Mother, you love me, don't you? Ever so much?"

"Why, you foolish girl—" But the ready tears were in Jennie's eyes.

As soon as Chickie was alone she gathered all his letters, tied them, packed them in a box, writing in big letters on the covers:

"Jennie or Jonathan: Burn this, as is, please!

"By order of your darling,

"CHICKIE."

It occurred to her this was an odd thing to do, but she couldn't bring herself to part with them—not now.

She called to Jennie that she was going for a walk. She went up to the top of Dolores Street, looking out over the railroad crossing and farther southward to the Mission Bay. Blue clouds, shot with rose and emerald, drifted over the bare Potrero hills. A sense of loneliness possessed her.

She was trembling. So foolish, all this—she imagined things—let her imagination run crazy with her. Barry said that. She was always doing it.

Suddenly she remembered what he said the first night he came home: "Brave—we've got to be. Otherwise the thing will get us. It will be a wall of reproaches and resentments we'll build between us—"

She was doing that; had been doing it; fastening on little things—fearing them—exaggerating them. She was a coward; not big; not free. Oh—she would wear him out with these petty irritations.

Her cheeks grew hot. She leaned on a low fence and stared at the changing sky. She longed for him—longed for the comfort of his voice, his arms.

It would be soon; it would have to be. Then all this hysterical tension would soften.

Well—she would bear it as he did. Hard for him, too. She would not be the one to whimper. No!

She went home refreshed, strengthened.

She didn't intend to tell him of the episode. But she did. Unfortunately it came at a time when he was least in the mood to hear it. They were parked at the beach, watching the search-lights playing on the waves.

He said: "You looked white, frail."

"I was scared white, and you would know." She told him that Jennie had come upon his letters; that she had been in a panic till she was certain Jennie hadn't read them.

He sat mute, his hands on the wheel. After a long while he slumped back in the seat. He said: "I wish to God it had never been."

The flat of his hand swept against her face would not have crushed her so. Terrible sounds roared in her ears; louder than the gray boom of the sea. Time stopped, weighted in terror.

Then his arm about her. He drew her. He rubbed her hands. After a long while: "Chickie—I didn't mean it that way. You know that—don't hold it against me."

She couldn't speak. He kissed her; began to plead. It was just that the everlasting concealment got him; just her fright and that she seemed unhappy. Oh—it was that things went all wrong at the office and he got a letter from his mother saying she wasn't well. It was everything hitting at once.

"Don't turn against me for a little thing like that, Chickie. Oh, smile! Don't look as though I'd killed you."

"But you said it. Oh, you'd want to wipe it all out?"

"No—"

"It makes me think you no longer want me—you're tired of me—of everything—"

"You don't think that! You can't. We'll forget all this,

some day. Don't spoil the whole evening." And he kept kissing her, murmuring to her, saying again and again: "You're beautiful, Chickie. I love you. You know it."

She forgot; she was happy.

But she would never let a scene like that come between them again. Oh, no!

And this strain would pass—of course. They would forget the unpleasant things.

But the weeks passed. Nothing was changed.

There were days and days that went singing in a spontaneous happiness. Noontimes when they brought their lunch and hurried to the ferry, sitting on a pier, eating, laughing. Nights when they danced or took long rides about the city.

Hours that drew them in ties of piercing sweetness. Once they went to a concert. John McCormack was the singer. He sang "Forgotten." Barry's hand sought hers. The music flowed into their hearts; made them one. When the yearning in that voice of living passion was but an echo in their ears, they remained stilled. In a moment of emotion like this, it seemed to Chickie that she no longer had any life of her own—none except through him. She wanted it so.

But there were other times when she lost this sense of absorbing nearness. Often, lying under a tree he would begin to argue, growing excited over some book; some pet idea. But she wanted only to dream, to let her fingers loiter over his forehead; to stoop down and kiss him. What matter if the world was wrong?

One Sunday—the first spring day they had driven down along the coast road, he was in this mood. After lunch he stretched himself out, resting against her arm.

"Chickie, the trees are climbing higher."

"Yes—and greener—"

"What an easy thing to be a tree or a bird or anything but us!"

"Why?"

"Well—a tree is a tree—no dualism there. Whoever or whatever it was that planted them and us in this grand blunder must have liked trees and birds and other critters best. Spring comes soft and easy for a tree. Now who would think of blaming this young acacia for putting forth new leaves and blossoms and flirting so with life? I ask you, frail, isn't a tree luckier than a man?"

"Don't be silly!"

"What do you mean, silly? That's deep stuff I'm giving you. Listen—suppose the tree had a brain or a soul perched up on its top branches and every time the roots gave a quiver or a branch swayed or a new little leaf thrust itself forth—suppose when that happened the fool brain or soul yelled out, 'Quit it now—stop throbbing down there. Don't move! Wait till next year!' Hell of a fine tree you'd have, wouldn't you? That is what we do—all of us—I wonder if it's right as we think?"

"Wouldn't it be better, Chickie, if we let the poor old body stretch itself now and then—not try to force it so—"

She said, absently: "Men follow the trees a great deal in that, don't they?"

"But I mean this—wouldn't it be better if the whole world would take a saner view—" And he went on, becoming so involved that she laughed and couldn't follow. She stooped down and kissed him.

He regarded her with amused, dubious eyes. Then he pulled her down:

"Look here, frail, you're a mental laggard! Stretch your brain a little! Do you realize that every time I wish to pour forth wisdom you stop me?"

"Ain't it sweet the way I do it?"

"Too sweet."

But she laughed and closed his eyes with her fingers, feeling anew her power over him.



A First National Picture.

CHICKIE HEARS THE CONFESSION OF LOVE FROM BARRY'S LIPS.

"Chickie."

CHAPTER LXVII

CONVENTION'S LASH

SHE seldom dropped in on Mary these days. She was afraid of her questions.

One night they bumped into each other as Mary was leaving her mother's. Mary said angrily, giving little Edward's go-cart a vigorous push: "Walk a ways with me, Chickie." Then abruptly: "What's this I hear about you?"

Trifles like that filled her with alarm—a random look; a word. Now she was cold; shocked into silence.

"Oh, it's true, is it? Pardon me for butting in."

Breathless, Chickie snapped: "Have sense! What in the world are you talking about?"

Mary flared about, stopping short: "You, Chickie Bryce! Nobody else! Nice thing that your friend, Janina Knowles, can tell it to me. After all these years!"

Belief like the soft evening breeze touched the hot burn in her mind. She tucked her arm in Mary's: "Let's have it, old dear. I don't know what you can be ranting about."

"Oh, no! But I didn't look for a slap in the face like this, Chickie. That one going to stand up with you! Well—it's your own business, but I'm here to say it's pretty raw. I may be a dub and all that, but I guess I could scrape the where-withal to buy a decent gown. And if I'm not thin enough to walk before you I could starve between now and June. Well—laugh! Oh—awfully funny, isn't it? But it doesn't strike me on the humorous toe. And don't think I'll get over it in a hurry, either. Perhaps that's why you've given me the out for the last few months? Well, you don't get away with it, that's all!"

She was almost running now—her dark face crimson. Chickie burst out laughing. When she tried to speak, she laughed again, half with relief, half with hysteria. Finally she said: "Sweet Mary! Lovely Mary!"

Mary bit her lips together.

Chickie said amiably: "I don't know what Janina can have told you, but it's not true."

"Well—I'm sorry I said anything, Chickie. But of course, I would! You know me. I suppose you're privileged to do as you please."

"Well, that will be about enough from you, Mrs. James Edward McPike! Step off your perch. If Janina gave you an ear full she had her fun out of it. She made it all up."

"Chickie, do you mean to say you're not engaged? You're not going to be married in June?"

"Unless I should elope or fall heiress, I'll still be Chickie Bryce, more's the pity!"

Mary glanced at her, unbelieving. At length she said: "You love this Barry Dunne, don't you, Chickie? You're wild about him? You've just about given up everything for him?"

They had reached Mary's door. Chickie stooped, pretending to button her pump. She said quietly: "Why have you such a grudge against him, Mary? You always speak so furiously."

"Come in. We haven't had half an hour to chat in ages." Little Edward had fallen asleep. Mary laid him in his crib. "He's all right for a while. Well—I have no grudge, Chickie. Only I did hope for something brilliant in you. I thought you'd surely tire of him or he'd get tired of you. Then you'd have sense. But here it's dragged on more than a year and you've cut out every one else. Now you say you're not even engaged. Well, I hope you don't intend to wait till all the flavor is gone—"

Chickie's throat was suddenly alive with hot little pulses that hammered; that made her voice tight.

Mary went on ruthlessly: "And I suppose you've let yourself care so much that if anything should come between you now, you'd be heartbroken?"

Chickie had a sudden wild impulse to say: "Yes—that's true, Mary. Nothing dare come between us now. What do you think of that?"

She fancied Mary's face getting dead and white; Mary's mouth dropping. Would Mary turn from her? Would Mary think it so monstrous? She wanted to know.

This thought often seized her. If she were to tell, would she be left without a friend in the world? And all these that loved her—Jennie, Jonathan, Jimmy—even Mary would freeze her from their hearts?

She asked Mary almost this very thing the next evening.

Barry happened to be working. So she and Mary went to a movie. It was Chickie's only chance to see her favorite stars because he hated movies and always fell asleep when she did prevail on him to go.

The play had as its central character a girl deserted by her lover. Watching a thing like this brought a faintness over her; thinking of it afterwards worked her to a frenzy.

She sat forward, taut, feverish. When the girl pleads with the man, clinging to him and he puts her coldly away, Chickie began to cry. Mary leaned toward her: "Only a picture, ole thing—save the weeps!"

She laughed. But she wished piercingly that she was alone; that Mary had not seen.

When they pushed out with the crowd into the garish lights of the vestibule, the jostling, the noisy talk and laughter of the people about her sounded stupid and boisterous. She took Mary's arm. "Let's hurry."

Mary tittered: "Heavens, Chickie, you're sentimental!"

"Well—I suppose so. It gets my goat in these pictures that the man is always the one who grows tired."

Mary shrugged. "Oh, pictures or life, Chickie, men are foot-loose, you know."

"But why should a man cease to care any more than a girl?"

Mary considered this a long time. "Well, I believe that women also get tired, but they're afraid to let go for fear they'll go down and down. They look on the man as a kind of life-saver, a protection. The man knows he has nothing to lose by getting tired; but the woman has, or she thinks she has. It's the same thing."

"You're talking old-fashioned, Mary. In this day and age a girl doesn't think anything of the kind. She knows it's no worse for her to do things than it is for a man."

Mary sniffed. "Oh, kid yourself! We're the same dumb beasts to-day that we always were. And there won't be any escape till they turn us out by a new pattern. That doesn't seem very near. If there's any paying to be done, it's still little Eve that does it. Married or single, the woman's the goat!"

"Well—but when you come right down to it, Mary, what's so wrong about it that she should have to pay? I mean, what's wrong about a love like that in the play? Isn't it silly to call one emotion holy just because a few words are said over it;

and the same emotion a crime because these words aren't said?"

She felt Mary's arm tremble; fear raced through her. What was the matter with her? Crazy—Mary would guess.

Mary said: "It's a great deal more than just the saying of a few words, Chickie. It's the whole intention to accept responsibility. And even if you say that kind of love isn't wrong—well, it's stupid. Why should a girl take a chance when the odds are all against her? If she has any bean at all, she doesn't need to."

Chickie cried out impatiently: "Mary, don't be so smug! As though love stops to figure like that. You know it doesn't. But, anyway, the odds don't seem to be against the girls to-day. They get away with them pretty cleverly. And if they wish to marry, they do! The men don't seem to mind."

"Bunk, Chickie! We don't hear of all the cases. It's my opinion that man hasn't changed much in the last century. Let him have the gains without the pains and you won't find him two-timing to Lohengrin!"

Chickie felt that a flame whipped up and hit her in the face. But she laughed: "Not much of a recommendation for the dear men, and you such a beloved wife, Mary!"

She hurried down the street. Dizziness whirled about her. Rounding the corner she leaned against a garden rail, wiped her face. It seemed to her that her ideas were falling about her like blocks that a child has unsteadily builded into a tower.

She said to herself: "Mary doesn't know! What does she know?"

But she went into the kitchen and sat on a box. When Wildie, yawning and slow, crouched at her feet she pulled him up, his head on her shoulder. She whispered, "Hush, Wildie." When he licked her face he seemed to know the tears, or she fancied that he did because of the eager devotion in his eyes. It made her cry.

All the next day she was depressed. She identified herself with the girl in the play. She imagined Barry the hero, looking at her coldly, putting her off when she clung to him. The sense of desertion laid hold of her.

By five o'clock she was excited . . . a still, deadly excitement. It drove her; made her half wild. When he met her in the alley she turned this on him. And in a moment the thing was beyond her control.

CHAPTER LXVIII

THE CLASH

THERE was the buoyant lilt about him that delighted her so when he danced. Now he came swinging lightly, as though there were no problems in the world. He said, breezily: "Listen, frail—have a bite downtown with your lover. That'll give us an hour, anyway."

"You have to work to-night?"

"Yes—"

She followed without glancing at him. Her breath quickened.

They took a booth in a small restaurant. And he launched impetuously into a dozen themes. He recounted whimsical scraps of information he had gathered in an old law book—laws about witches; dogs brought to trial—

She listened, the resentment in her growing. He didn't even notice her melancholy; didn't seem to perceive that her heart was bursting.

But finally, leaning over and touching her hand, he laughed: "Well, frail, appreciative, aren't you? Five dollars' worth of entertainment and not a smile. Why so mute?"

"Nothing—nothing much—"

"Worked hard to-day, didn't you? Not even a moment to steal a glance alleyways, did you?"

She kept her head lowered, stirred her coffee. "Oh, I didn't know—"

Then he was aware and half guessed what was coming. He waited, the merriment in his face flattening to a moody resignation. Finally: "Oh, what's the use, Chickie? Why are you feeling so low? Isn't everything going all right?"

"Is it?" A little, high-pitched laugh: "Is it going at all?"

He was puzzled: "Why get excited about it, now, Chickie? Well—we knew all along there'd be a good wait—"

"But months and months—nothing changed—"

"We're happy, aren't we? We're living. Listen, Chickie, why create troubles? I don't see that we have any particular kick—"

"You don't—no?" Her lips moved. When she could control them she said brokenly: "It may go on like this years—we may grow tired and then we never will be married!"

He regarded her with leisurely astonishment. This maddened her. He said calmly, shrugging: "Well, if that's to happen and we're going to get bored with each other, I'd say it was a whole lot better if we aren't married—"

She half rose. She pressed her hands on the table: "Oh—you feel like that—do you?"

"What's the matter with you, anyway, Chickie? What's happened? Why bring this up? I thought we were happy as larks. You were!"

"You think so? You want it like this? You meant it to be like this?" She rushed on tight, shrill with excitement. "Oh, you don't care—you're satisfied! You have the gains—"

Suddenly his eyes blazed with hurt; with a mounting fury. He caught her hands: "Chickie, stop! That's enough—"

She shook him off: "All right, it is!" She grabbed up her purse and half blinded with tears went rushing to the door.

The cool air touched her with forlorn shock. She hurried down the street, but her ears strained wildly, listening for steps that followed.

At the corner she stepped behind a building. She looked back, clenching her hands. Oh, in a moment he would come; grab her arm, laugh at her.

Now she was a little cool and wanted this.

The door swung open. She pretended to walk on swiftly. She looked back. No one was coming.

And she reached the car; let three pass, then five. Weights of iron seemed hung from her shoulders, bearing her down. She said to herself, miserably, "Not coming—ah!"

At last she got on the car, squeezing herself in the corner. She didn't think. His eyes, blazing with fury, followed her. His hand, suddenly seizing her wrists, was there like a burn.

Her frenzy ebbed. She grew miserable, with a chill, fluttering disquiet. She tried to go back over the scene; she could only remember its shrill incoherence. And now it seemed unreal, incredible. Why had she done this?

The happiness of the past weeks flashed like sun in her face—the nights they had watched the water, her head on his shoulder; the long Sundays on the hilltop.

She was half moved to get off the car, dash back. Then she

began to expect that he was following her. He would be at the house when she arrived. He would say, impulsively, "Chickie, listen—we don't want this—"

But he wasn't there. He had gone back to the office. And now, perhaps, he was standing moodily at the window thinking of her. Oh, he would be sorry. He would pick up the telephone—

She saw him doing these things. She wandered aimlessly about her room, stopping at the bed, at the bureau—waiting. The phone didn't ring.

The night became insupportable. She felt as though she were being flung now this way, now that. One moment her mind seethed with indignation; the next it was chilled and humble.

When she lay in bed, going over it endlessly, fighting it off, then wooing it back she suddenly saw his face alive with merriment as he had come swinging toward her. She saw it like this, then flattening in that annoyed resignation.

Mary—what did she know—lot she knew! Mary had plunged her into this—

She went into the office the next morning in a hard, steely quiet. She glanced to his window—saw a shadow. She felt her breath, hot, bursting.

At noon, typing relentlessly, she was nevertheless waiting for his form to come to the window—a boyish grin to light his mouth, full cut, sweet.

The noon hour passed. Janina said: "Suppose we chow, together, baby? You don't seem engaged."

Janina was talkative. A young girl both of them knew was suing for divorce. The papers were full of it as they had been of the marriage a year previous. This furnished Janina with a theme.

"This comes," she pronounced with her infallible air, "of allowing youngsters to sign away their lives. As I've always held, no man under thirty, no girl under twenty-five, should be allowed to contract a permanent marriage."

"Ho—Janina! Permanent anything! They don't!"

"But there's all this bother about divorce, all this unnecessary publicity. Does no good to any one. In my plan there would be trial contracts for the younger set. When the ties were found intolerable to either party, as of course they're bound to be sooner or later, they could be set aside. Why

not? Since first loves never last and yet they will have their sway—"

Faintly: "Why shouldn't they last, Janina?"

"No foundation, ole dear. Nothing but the grand animal urge that sweeps everything out of its way. When it's appeased, nothing left to hold the pair together."

"Lots of first loves last! How can you know that it's only a kind of attraction?"

"By its folly, baby! By its blindness. By the insanity of its thrill. Typical case in your own mitts, ole dear. Otherwise you'd grab off the man who could give you happiness plus, and you wouldn't be languishing for the grand and glorious Galahad of the empty pockets!"

Chickie shut her eyes, smiled vaguely. She managed to say: "That wise you are, Janina! But watch."

"I am—"

Janina's words condemned him. Listening to them, Chickie wanted to steal away; never look at that window again. There was no gladness left on the earth.

All afternoon she worked in this bleakness. At five o'clock she said to herself coldly: "No—I'll not go down there! Let him phone! He might know I didn't mean all that—"

Yet her steps took her to the alley. She waited. Girls passed. She pretended to walk back to the office. She glanced upward to his building.

Cruelly it came to her that he wasn't coming. She was alone in the narrow street.

Another day passed.

The third she was beside herself. She wrote a note, tore it up. She went into a telephone booth after lunch. And went out again without calling him. She said to herself faintly: "It's over." It was like a doom.

CHAPTER LXIX

AMENDS

ALL afternoon she sat with her profile to his window. From the shadow he would see her. He would know that her heart was breaking. And in his quick, impetuous way he would brush aside this absurd quarrel. He would grab up the phone and call to her, "Hey, there, frail, why so sad? Smile, won't you!"

She hoped for this with a hope that became anguish. Five o'clock—another day gone. As she put on her hat she turned from the sight of her own face. Its prettiness hurt her. Walking down Montgomery Street, she kept taking long breaths to hold the tears from her eyes.

Now the feeling of expectance that had nerved her for three days was gone. She said to herself: "He won't come. He doesn't care. He's glad. He must be—take an excuse like this. Oh, he wanted to be done with it all!" She dropped these thoughts cruelly, like hot stones, into her heart. It grew so heavy she felt she could no longer endure its weight.

She had reached the breaking point, and she knew it. Too incredible to have it end like this. She saw herself rushing to him, twining her fingers in his hand, making him speak to her—making him turn. This vision of herself pleading made her wince—it was pitiful.

She denied it—no, she would never do this. Cry her eyes out first. Three days and he let them pass—let her go out of that restaurant. Oh, he was probably hard and confident about it—knew she would come begging to him.

Her eyes were filled now. She didn't care. Suddenly some one walked at her side; a hand on her elbow. She stopped, overcome.

He said: "Chickie!" Breathless like that. Then: "Chickie, want me here?"

She gave him a swift glance, all tremulous, not daring to meet his eyes.

"Stay down then, will you?"

Though she could scarce speak for the tumult; though she wished to lean against him, laugh and laugh—for all this she walked on silent. Oh, he was the one who had come. He cared! Well—then he was the one who should kneel—

"Not mad now, Chickie? Ah, you don't hate me any more? Please, stay down—"

"Well—but I don't know—"

"All right, then—I know—"

"Oh—but three days—"

"Yes—and it's not going to be four. You don't want that, do you? Listen, Chickie, you were the one who ran away. Weren't you now—"

She touched his hand, pleading. She would have been content to walk on like this always. Just that he was here; just that he had come to her and that now a lightness and a warmth ran singing through her nerves.

Life was sweet again; the world a happy place. The two of them—only that— She felt him tall—supple, swinging along at her side, now and then looking down with a laugh. Once he said: "Cat comes back, frail—glad?" There had never been a joy to equal this.

But when they sat at the table, she felt a pang because he had a strained, pale look and his red hair was so brushed back that his eyes seemed large and anxious. He said eagerly: "Chickie, were you going to let it end like this?"

"Could it end so, Barry? Oh, would you have wanted that?"

"Does it look like it, Chickie? But I want to know how you felt. I want to know if you really intended to let it go."

She wouldn't answer. She evaded. "You let me go out of the restaurant, and you knew I was beside myself. You had only to put out your hand."

He answered somberly: "Perhaps you don't recall what you said. You said it as if you meant it. And if you do, I'm not going to put out my hand to stay you. No—not even now. If you meant what you said, Chickie—you can go—"

He went on saying things that frightened her, that took down the joy that had arisen.

"We have to settle this. No two ways about that—"

She asked, faintly: "What did I say?"

Looking at him, she saw the resentment coming hotly into the young boy's eyes. "I have the gains! You said that. So, I'm satisfied—"

Color splashed vividly through her cheeks.

"Did you mean by that, Chickie, that you never wanted me? You don't care, and it's all on my side? All to please me?"

"No—not that—no—"

"Well, what?"

"Nothing—don't—oh, I didn't mean that. I was excited. You see—" Her face grew tense, imploring, vivid with her emotions. She told him of the play and how it had shaken her; how she fancied herself in the girl's place. Then she spoke of Mary and things Mary said.

His hands trembled. He reached over and took hers. "All this means that in your heart, Chickie, you think it's wrong. You've thought that from the beginning. You're sorry and so you blame me—"

"No—I don't care. Now I know that I don't care. Don't look at me so!"

But his eyes were full of passionate doubt and hurt. "If you loved me enough, Chickie, and felt that it was right, you'd be fearless about it. You aren't. You let everything that Mary or Jennie or any one else says beat you. The first thing we know we'll be flying at each other's throats!"

"No! Oh really, I feel different now. And this won't last always, will it, Barry? We'll soon be able—?"

He dug his chin in his palm. With a pencil he made endless stars on the tablecloth. "I don't know. Moore's in town. They're not doing a thing with the coast line—"

She sat motionless, her heart bounding.

He went on: "They won't do anything this year. I'm to blame, of course. I never should have gone back that time to the river. Arrogance! It wouldn't have happened. You'd be happy. No use harking back now. Well—you don't have to go on! My mother's in the hospital, Chickie. I had to borrow \$500 from Tufts. I didn't tell you before. Didn't want to worry you. Well—I don't know where I get off or when—"

He glanced at her with swift, beseeching humility.

She said, her voice all toneless: "You mean it's further away?"

"Well—I don't know—no nearer—" And when she said nothing to that, "You see, don't you? Say something! You won't? You think it better end? That's your answer, is it?"

She put her hands over her face. He got up quickly and

held her coat. "You do! Let's get out of here. You feel that way?"

It seemed to Chickie that he was running reckless; plunging her headlong. That it was dark. But she followed.

There rose in her a strange resistance to this haste. She felt a thing pulling her back; a sudden laxness; a wish to drop behind; to call out: "Oh, well, all right, then, you go on. Leave me here! Let it end!"

She put her head down—hurried.

Seated in the car, he turned a blanched face to her. He said abruptly: "You're right! I suppose so."

She shut her eyes, moving toward him with a sound half laugh, half cry: "What do you mean, Barry? Oh, foolish! Can I go back now? You know I can't. Oh—these three days."

He pressed her hands. "But you can't stand it, Chickie. It's too hard for you. There'll be things again—"

"No—no! Oh, it's too late now, Barry. We have to go on. Oh, I do! No matter what. Oh, if you should end it—"

He stooped down swiftly and kissed her. He said ardently: "No! I won't!"

CHAPTER LXX

NEW WORLD

"BUT if there were just the two of us, Chickie, and we wouldn't let the world interfere—think how sweet—not a ripple ever—"

"There is the world—" She spoke in a dream, contented now—watching pale ladies woven of fog, hurrying through the trees, vanishing delicately in the somber lanes about the lake. "We can't shut the world out so. And there isn't just the two of us—there isn't—"

She wasn't measuring her words—scarcely heeding what she said. Their import came upon her starkly like a ruffian lurching suddenly from a doorway in the shadow . . . came at a moment when she was laughing and defenseless. Not ready for the world—

They were at the Mechanics' library. He was looking for a book. Chickie loitered in the alcoves, glancing aimlessly over the titles. She heard a soft, impatient sigh and turning saw Bess Abbot, with an air of great resignation, pull down a heavy volume.

She said merrily: "Oh, still alive, Bess? I thought we had you all settled in that nice ivory coffin?"

"No—still shuffling along in this weary coil! I've decided to linger a while longer. You see, I've discovered myself or rather Professor Molino discovered me." The brown eyes glinted. "Wonderful, my dear! Perfectly thrilling to wake up at twenty-two and suddenly learn that one possesses a soul—a brain. Here I was destined to be a great philosopher and from the cradle they allowed me to waste my gifts on clothes and teas and bridge. No wonder I've died a thousand deaths.

"Don't look so astonished, my dear. I'm rational. I've been psychoanalyzed. That's all. I paid \$2.50, revealed all my suppressed desires; my wild longings and in return I'm told that I'm intellectual. I must cultivate my brain. Here I am!

"Isn't that exciting? Fancy a man staring at me, cool as ice, and saying: 'My dear Mrs. Stoney, you're bored! You have money, too much of it. You have friends, leisure, love,

But you aren't satisfied. Why? Because, Mrs. Stoney, you have a brain. It clamors for nourishment.'"

She rattled on in this glib monologue, delighted when Chickie, incredulous and fascinated, exclaimed: "You don't mean to say that you went to this strange man and told him all your secretest thoughts, and even things you feel and wish for?"

Bess raised her shoulder with an amused sniff: "He tells you—tears your past to tatters. I got off easy. Why, my dear, the grilling he gave Ethel Chadman! Fancy Ethel psychoanalyzed into a job! Punching a time clock in the White House all because Professor Molino says, 'You're going to seed. Your energies need outlet. You'd make an excellent business woman. Don't lose another week—go down and get work, if it's standing behind a counter.' And Ethel goes!

"Well, here comes your steady—oh, by the way, why don't you two come out to-morrow night? I'm having Basil Arthur give a course of lectures"—she sighed languidly—"all in the course of finding a soul, you know. But he's good. We're starting with Plato. You'll like that, Red. I'm having a number of brows present to lend atmosphere."

Chickie accepted with impulsive delight. She said childishly when Bess was gone: "Isn't that otherwise, though! Isn't that capricious-like—turning philosopher over night! I'm glad we're to go."

He grinned. "Bunk! Idle dame—nothing to do but pamper herself—running around paying some clever crook two and a half to tell her she's a useless parasite. Plato—well, leave it to fools to rush in where angels fear to tread."

Chickie dismissed him with a flippant: "That for a lordly male and a cynic!"

She was stirred—alight with eagerness. Bess and her world were captivating.

They went. Machines were parked for a block about the house.

"Idiots! We're crazy, Chickie, to waste the whole evening. Let's not go in!"

"Hush—the idea! I wouldn't dream of missing it!"

They were late and took chairs near the door of the library. The room was crowded. The speaker, standing behind a table, had an absent, negligent air—the look of a poet or an ascetic in his broad forehead and long slender nose. He spoke in a voice so low its sound was scarcely audible. He went on like

this till a deadly hush spread over the room. Then sentences boomed. The mere volume and wealth of sound caught Chickie with a thrill.

She listened spellbound, not bothering to follow the drift of the talk. Plato—oh, yes—pupil of Socrates—a Greek—she knew this from her high school history. When the lecture was finished she knew little more.

But she said to Barry: "Wonderful—such a voice!" Her eyes shone.

He answered, tense, "Like it, frail? Say—good, wasn't it?"

Now there was a pleasant stir—then an animated rush of talk—then Bess and several others thronging at the long table and Basil Arthur with a slightly contemptuous smile holding court.

Barry said: "Well—show's over. Come again next week—eh?"

"I'd love to—I like this!" And Chickie was glancing about the wide room, noting the tapestries—the walls lined with books—

And some one stood behind her. Some one said in a voice that was soft like water: "Oh, Miss Bryce—what a pleasure! We philosophers meet now and then."

Chickie turned with a start. She knew the blood flew into her face. But even in her confusion she saw Barry's forehead stain. She said, holding down her sudden excitement, "Miss Moore—I'm glad. You're here for all summer?"

"Not that long." Ila Moore—beautiful—an air of nobility about her—her skin whiter—eyes bluer—so it seemed to Chickie in a quick stab of fear.

For Ila Moore began to talk. The lecture—really penetrating, wasn't it? And she turned to Chickie with comments that Chickie didn't quite understand. Barry answered.

And all at once Chickie grew hot and uncomfortable. She smiled—made a few struggling remarks. Then she listened, her cheeks painfully red.

Ila said: "Well, I suppose we'll meet again next week? I've often thought of you, Miss Bryce. And we do look alike—you know! Only you're prettier."

Chickie laughed. "And you're deeper!"

"I'm not sure about that." She turned to Barry, saying calmly, in her clear, soft voice: "We see you to-morrow night?"

"Yes—that's so!" He answered swiftly, his face half turned. But his lips trembled and he cast a hurried look to Chickie. He knew that she had heard.

They got into the car. Neither of them spoke. Chickie's pulses raced. They made her breath light—uncontrolled. For blocks they drove in silence.

Finally he said, "You're thinking things."

She bit her lips. Tears stung hotly at her eyes.

He said, resentfully, "You are, aren't you?"

She said, pitifully, "Can I help it?"

"Yes! I'm going there for dinner to-morrow night. Her father asked me. I met him the night you ran away. I didn't care. I said I'd go."

She made no comment.

"Well, you're angry?" He stopped the car and stared at her. "Don't you believe me?"

"Don't—oh, don't let's quarrel again—yes—but now—you don't need to go now, do you?"

"Well—well—you mean I should ring up Moore and tell him I won't come. Why? You don't trust me that much?"

"It's not that—"

"You want me to call it off? I can't do it! I'd make a fool of myself. I've known these people for years. Moore is a big man. I'm not going to give him a slap. It may come back at us later," he went on, justifying himself.

His words were little nails driving cold into her mind. She said: "Oh, all right, then—go. You can't help it."

He took it lightly: "Honestly, Chickie? You don't care? Why should you? Listen, frail—I've met girls, haven't I?"

She said—and laughed—"Oh, my, yes—and you so brilliant; and you so handsome! But you weren't going to tell me, Barry—"

"Listen—I guessed how you'd feel. What was the use?"

She pulled him down to her. She said again: "All right—kiss me."

The next night she sat in her room and tried to read. She kept seeing Ila Moore—kept wanting to rush out and fling herself between them. She felt a dread—it was colder than jealousy.

CHAPTER LXXI

THE CRITIC

CHICKIE stood behind the curtains in the living room, glancing with suppressed excitement down the block. She could feel her eyes hard and bright; her breath strain. A hot vividness, like flame, touched all her nerves.

She was beautiful to-night. She had made sure of that—combing her hair so; polishing her nails; a touch of rouge to her cheeks. Oh, he would see! He would find her lovely; lovelier than ever. Others, even a girl more brilliant—even a girl who knew all about Plato and strange theories of ideas, would pale beside her.

And he would look down gayly and murmur: "Ah—the dear thing—so pretty she is! Away with pedantic dames!"

She expected this. Yet now, awaiting him, she was all taut—uncertain. She saw his car swing round the corner, and ran into her room, making Jonathan open the door.

But his eyes did light when he saw her. And he did say with the merriness in his voice: "Ah—you sweet thing! All dolled?"

That boldened her so that she said as they drove downtown to dance: "And you had a nice time, Mr. Red, flirting with other frails?"

A burst of enthusiasm: "You missed it! I wished a hundred times you were there. Say, we've been buried for the last year—we don't get around—don't see things. We've just about gone to seed. I've forgotten there was such a thing as a thought in the world—"

"Oh—as worse as that, is it? Heavens—an' they let us live!" But she felt a stillness like a thing that folded down its wings within her.

"Well—but people like the Moores know how to live. They're tingling. Basil Arthur was there. That fellow's a genius. Inspiring to hear him go to it. And there was a girl friend of Ila's who's just returned from Russia—been all over the world—some talker! And a young fellow who's been

engineering in Alaska since he quit college—all kinds of racy experiences to tell. I never heard so much spontaneous brilliance in my life. It was a treat.

"There was a big editor from some Eastern magazine. He's out here on a visit. Interested in Ila."

Faintly: "You mean he's in love with her? They're engaged?"

"Oh, no—he's old—about fifty. I mean he's excited about her poetry. Thinks she has a big future."

"She writes? Oh—I didn't know that—"

"Well—she hasn't done much with it, yet. She won a prize last week. She's done some good stuff. I only read a couple."

Watching him feverishly but with a soft, gracious smile: "Gifted, isn't she? And beautiful, too—"

"Yes—and not a trace of conceit. Doesn't seem to think herself at all wonderful. That's rather unusual, isn't it?"

He said all this as though he were talking to his mother or to any dear old lady whose heart has long ceased its storm.

"Why she even asked my opinion as though I were an infallible critic."

"And aren't you? Why, I thought you and poetry were twins—"

"Well—I like it—that's all."

"So it was all wondrous, I take it?" She spoke with unnatural quiet. This he didn't observe.

"Yes, it was! You begin to stop, look and listen after an evening like that. It makes you want to clip on your spurs—"

And suddenly, with a little gulp at her throat, she laughed. She touched his arm. "Clip on your spurs, Barry, and gallop away from your poor, untutored idiot. Oh—and you would?"

The color died in his cheeks. He looked down. As he did this, she had a queer feeling that he had forgotten her; that he had been talking on in this joyous stimulation as though to his own thoughts. And he was now recalled by her voice to her form next to his.

He said abruptly: "Don't say a thing like that! Why should you?"

She laughed. She ran her fingers along his arm. She said: "Well—and what else? They said, 'Come again and stay longer,' did they?"

He shrugged. "Well, naturally—" He had finished his account. He wouldn't add to it.

But when they were dancing and he held her so that she felt his heart thump, she murmured, her lips brushing an instant along his chin: "Barry—look down now. Barry—oh, I feel so—"

"What—"

"That you don't love me—"

"No—that's not it. You're angry that I went, Chickie—"

"Oh, I'm not—"

"Then you're sorry I enjoyed it. You don't want that."

She was silent, knowing this was true.

He went on, moodily: "Why? I can't figure that. It's the first time I've met a crowd like that in years. I'd almost forgotten such people lived. They're the only ones worth while. And you blame me for enjoying them. Don't you?"

She kept her eyes lowered. They were stinging. A tear dropped against his shoulder. When she didn't answer he insisted: "Well—you do! That's plain! You begrudge me the pleasure I had—"

"No—how can you say it? I don't begrudge you anything—oh, anything!" Her fingers trembled on his. "You know that, don't you?"

Softened, he drew her: "Yes—of course! But why do you feel so, then? You're not sorry I like it—but what?"

A faint laugh: "I don't know. Except what you said about going to seed this last year and then about clipping on your spurs—oh, all that—"

She raised her eyes, moist—shining—smiled. He looked at them a long while. Then he said: "I won't go again, Chickie."

"Really—you mean that?"

"Yes—"

Lightness in her thoughts. The evening glowed.

But that night, kicking off her pumps, she sat motionless on the bed. She remembered the look on his face when he said, "I won't go again."

And now it troubled her. So quiet his eyes were!

She said suddenly: "But he'd like to go again—oh, he wants that—"

When finally she slept his eyes returned in her dream—then his face. He said: "You begrudge me pleasure! You want to hold me back—" A look of anger straightened the young, impetuous mouth.

She was unhappy until she saw him the next day; until she

found him buoyant and careless again. He brought her a book: "Here, frail—read this! Since you will drag me to lectures, let's know what they're about!"

It was "Plato's Republic."

She said, dismayed: "Oh, well—well, I don't care if you don't want to go to those lectures. I won't drag you."

He answered, breezily: "Why not? Now that we've started—you loved it—didn't you say that?"

"Yes."

But the Tuesday night when they started for Bess Abbot's home she was all on edge. She had read here and there through the book—gathered a few ideas. She felt as though she were at school, going to take some grilling examination. And she would fail—surely.

The lecture never touched on any of the themes she had read. She watched Barry's face—she glanced furtively about the room. She said to herself: "Most of these people are pretending. They're all bluffing, too."

Then she saw Ila Moore, a tranquil understanding like a light in her eyes. She wondered if Ila would come and talk to them afterwards.

She did. She seemed to know everything—as much as Basil Arthur—more than Barry. The two of them were soon talking. Chickie listened.

Barry drew her into the conversation—mentioned things he knew she had read. They talked about an hour.

When they left Chickie said, excited: "Where did she learn so much?"

"Nothing to do but study all her life. She likes it. Not pedantic, either, is she?"

"I don't know what pedantic is."

In her heart Chickie thought: "Why should she come and talk to him? She knows I love him—she must know that." A fury of possession roused. She had no right to walk over so calmly, talk so confidently. Well, there would be no more of these lectures.

But there were. She grew to fear them—then to hate them.

Little groups of three or four remained afterwards. Controversy waxed spirited. Often Barry and Ila Moore were left discussing vividly the points that had arisen.

As they drove home and he would continue animatedly the

discussion with Chickie, she grew silent. Often she would put her hand in his: "You love me, Barry?"

One night, taking a paper from his pocket—a card with verses written on it fell to the table—he picked it up quickly—his face red. He drew a long breath.

Finally he said: "Like to hear this, Chickie? What do you think of it?"

It was a poem Ila had written.

Chickie said in a strained, hurried voice: "Oh—beautiful—did she send it to you?"

He said quietly: "No—no—she asked me my opinion of this and several others—well—you see—I've read a bit—well—I went out there yesterday and she read them to me—"

CHAPTER LXXII

DOUBT

HE held the card with the verses. There was no color in his face. And finally he glanced at Chickie, his eyes seeking and anxious.

She knew that he was waiting. But she sat with arms quiet in her lap, her head lowered. He came over and took her hand:

"Chickie, listen, I couldn't get out of it. I didn't want to go. She phoned and asked me; said it would be a great favor—"

She closed her eyes. No—she wouldn't cry—let him see her tears. Oh, no! If he wanted to read Ila Moore's poems, have tea with her, he could—

"You won't look at me? You're furious? You think I should have refused?"

She put her hand up and shaded her face, hiding her chin because it trembled so. Silence stretched between them, raw with pain.

He walked over to the table, picked up a book, turning the pages. He came back: "Lord, Chickie, it's not a tragedy, is it? Aren't you going to say anything at all? What did I do that's so awful—that you won't look at me? Listened to her read half a dozen poems, told her what I thought. That's all. Not more than an hour all together—is that such a crime?"

He repeated this; he began talking rapidly: "Lord, Chickie—we have to have a few contacts, don't we? We can't bury ourselves. I didn't think you'd mind so. You don't trust me—that's all! If you did, would you care for an hour given like that? You'd mind if I talk—"

She grew faint because of the warmth stealing thickly like waves over her heart. She said: "Oh, Barry, stop! Never mind—I see."

He sat beside her. "What do you see? You think you see what?"

Suddenly she raised her head and, meeting his vivid eyes,

moved toward him, seized his hands, pressing them against her face.

He drew a deep, pained breath. "Chickie, what's the matter with you? Oh, you don't feel this miserable about it—over that? A little thing like that!"

A soft, broken sound: "You call it little. Oh, it's not just that. It's everything."

"What do you mean by everything?"

"You like to go there. You think I shouldn't oppose you. You want to meet these people—I'm not enough for you. Oh, I see—"

He put his arm about her. "We can't do this, Chickie—we can't go wild over everything that comes up. I'm sorry I went—I didn't really want to. I enjoyed that dinner, yes—and I've liked these meetings—that's what you mean. But you aren't going to make me out a criminal because I went to see an old friend for an hour, are you? I'd seem a churl to refuse a request like that."

"You didn't tell me. You didn't intend to. Is that fair?"

"No, I suppose not. But I guessed you wouldn't like it, and, Lord! if we're going to nag each other over every little thing—well—"

The cords of her throat tightened like a claw—like a hot, living anguish. She kept looking at her hands, rubbing them. "She knows about us, Barry. Should she ask you to go there? She knows as well—as well about us!"

"Listen, Chickie. Ila Moore doesn't look at things the way other people do. She doesn't think a snap about asking me to go there, like she did yesterday. She would have asked me just the same if I were fifty or if I were married. She doesn't think of love. She has a hundred interests—"

He covered her twitching hands; consoled her, saying again and again, "Don't make a tragedy of it. I like to go there—yes. I like to talk to her. But I like talking to Basil Arthur or Tufts. Is that anything? Oh, it isn't. It has nothing to do with love. I love you—Chickie—you know that—no one else—"

She let her head rest against his shoulder, her eyes wet. "Really, Barry? Do you mean it? Only say it, if it's true—"

She grew calm, letting her thought sink in her emotions. But the fear of losing him crept into her heart and lodged there, alert; whispering with terror. So that now, if she stood

at her window and he didn't hurry from the shadow with a happy grin, she thought: "He's tired of me—tired of this—" And if he came, leaned his hands on the ledge, made a swift movement with his lips, tears shot to her eyes. He did that just to please her—not because he wanted to—oh, she could tell—

She was far removed from the blithe, flippant Chickie who felt herself indeed a "Blessed Damozel" clothed with mysterious charm; who took his first gift—the little set of books—with a majestic, "The whole earth you bring, Mr. Red? Tish! 'Tis no more than I expect!"

It made her tense and hyper-sensitive, so that little incidents unnerved her. Jonathan, raising her chin in his palm, saying, "Chickie, girl, little springs inside all quiet to-day? No talk for your old dad? What's the matter with her, mother?" Little things like that made her wish to cry.

Or Barry sitting in the machine, musing, recalling arguments and quotations. Oh, that let her know Ila was in his mind; oh, that made her wind her hands under his, call him back—

Even Wildie could do a thing that made her heart brim. Like one Sunday morning when they walked to the beach. Reaching the ocean, they were tired and lagged. The dog kept bounding ahead of them and running back, tapping his paw inquisitively as though to say: "What's happened? Can't you people hurry?" Finally he dashed to Chickie's side, walking along somberly, licking her hand, rubbing his nose against her. When she paid no attention he jumped up, seeming all concerned and licked her face. She stooped down quickly, patting him. She was touched piercingly. She said with a little hysterical laugh: "Oh, you love your pretty lady, dog—don't you?"

Even in the sweetest moments when both of them were gay, her feeling quivered at the surface, waiting for hurts. As one night when they had dinner downtown and were sauntering along Geary Street afterwards, looking in the shop windows. Often Chickie made him do this, rather delighting at his reluctance; at his scorn for her absorbing interest in clothes. She was aware that he was secretly appalled at her preoccupation with the things of fashion.

They looked at a wonderful black crêpe wrap widely bordered with summer ermine. Chickie sighed. All these allur-

ing furs and lustrous fabrics filled her with sensuous joy. She said dreamily: "Some day, my darling Red, you'll swathe me in mole and squirrel from my head to my feet and seven diamonds to wear in my hair, place of the seven stars, you know."

"Would that make you so happy, Chickie?"

"Would it!"

"Rather than a trip to Honolulu?"

"Both—I want both—"

He laughed: "But the coat first, I take it! Lordee, Chickie, you spend an awful lot on what you wear. In a year you could stack a library—you just about spend your whole salary on clothes—"

"Doesn't he wish me to be beautiful? Doesn't he like me in gorgeous raiment—"

"Well—he do. But if you stop to count it up, you're just giving up your life and all your earnings to these things. It's your great interest. That's awful. Take clothes away from the average girl and you take her life, don't you?"

Another time she would have answered airily: "Oh, us wimmin! We're the empty lot!"

But now she thought with a chill: "My only interest! He comparing me—to her—"

She grew silent, turning her head from him. He reached down for her hand. "Not sore, frail? Not mad for a little thing like that?"

"No—why, no—of course not!"

But her eyes had a hurt, gentle look in them. And he had come to expect this—watch for it. It was a torment to him. Inwardly it made him impatient—restless—burdened.

He didn't want Chickie to look at him so. Say something gracious; something sweet; make her laugh. He began to talk. "Remember that engineer I met? Fellow who's been in Alaska all these years? He dropped into the office to-day. Look—gave me a nugget. Here it is! Yours, frail!"

He put the little drop of gold on her glove. She was delighted. "Wasn't that generous? Why did he come in—he must like you?"

He paused. Then hurriedly: "Well—he's giving a dinner Saturday night—kind of farewell. He's going back next week. He asked me to it."

"Oh!" and quietly: "Is it a stag affair?"

"No—no, I don't think so—same crowd as at the other one—"

Faintly: "You're going?"

"I haven't thought about it."

She bit her lips, her feet stumbling.

He said tensely: "You think I shouldn't, don't you?"

She wouldn't answer.

"You do?"

"I don't know," and brokenly: "Whatever you want—"

He let it pass. When he was leaving her that night, he said: "Well, I'm not going to that dinner, Chickie. I'd like to—of course—but I don't care if you feel so—honestly. Now laugh—good Lord!"

And she did. She ran her hands up to his neck. She pulled his head down, pressed her cheek on his.

At noon Saturday he said to her suddenly: "I have to work to-night, Chickie."

It came so abruptly she stared. She said, incredulous: "Oh—you do—"

He watched her narrowly, his answer rough: "Yes! I do!"

"Why—all right—"

But she felt as though a hot iron seared over her body, scorching to her veins. And the heat of it grew. She couldn't put it down.

That night, sitting in the quiet, watching Jennie at her sewing, Jonathan at his paper, she felt the burn of it spreading to her mind—her heart—lighting wild fires. Had to work—night of the dinner—

She got up, her eyes darting: "I think I'll drop down and see Mary—we may go to a movie—well—"

She ran into her room—dressed. She pulled on her hat, sticking the hatpins through in such a frenzy of haste they jabbed her scalp. She said to herself: "No—I wouldn't think of it—No!" But she kept seeing his office. And it was dark—no light—no one working—oh, he wasn't there—

But perhaps he was—oh, maybe he was—

She got on the car and rode downtown. She went to her own building, intending to look from the window. But she had forgotten her key—she couldn't get in.

And she went into his building and along the corridors—stealing along, half running. A light streamed under the door.

Her heart swelled. But maybe it was some one else—maybe Tufts.

She loitered. She passed the door . . . listened.

Suddenly it flung open. He, standing there—he staring at her. Then his face ashen—then a white fury leaping in his eyes.

CHAPTER LXXIII

TRAPPED

SHE shrank against the wall, unable to take her eyes from the blaze of his.

In the stark cruelty of the moment she saw within the office another man—Tufts. And Tufts glanced at them in amazement, his expression narrowing as though it said: "Ah—I see!"

Barry crossed the threshold, pulling the door sharply. The whiteness of his face deepened to a leaden paint; his lips shook. And for an instant he stood so, his eyes denouncing and burning her.

She turned her head swiftly, putting up her hand. She wanted to run—beat down this shame rising in such multitudinous waves—covering her.

Then he—coming—seizing her arm, hurrying her down the corridor, rasping in a low, furious scorn: "What do you mean! What do you mean by this—coming here—"

She felt herself rushed along in a withering tumult, her mind going blind. She struggled. She wrenched from him, throwing back her head, saying in a strained, frightened tone: "Stop! I only came—I came—I wanted—"

He dropped her arm then, saying in a thick, hot voice: "Lord, stoop to this! Come down to spy on me—" He wiped his forehead, scorn blazing anew over his face: "What do you mean doing this!"

She leaned against the wall—abject and mute—beating about frantically for some defense. "No—I came—I wanted to see you—"

"Oh—come on—get out of here—want Tufts to come along—"

The elevator whizzing up the shaft stopped abruptly. A little man, operating it, poked out a roly head, his eyes bright, crinkling. He said: "Going down, Mr. Dunne?" Barry nodded, helped her into the car. And she smiled vaguely—all these details flashing with grotesque unreality on her thought.

As she stepped from the elevator and he held her arm, a warm, overpowering weakness charged over her, bowed her down. She wanted to lower her head—cover it with her arms—run wildly. She said: "Let me go! Don't hold me! Oh, you will—I say, let me go—"

But he led her to the machine, opened the door.

She shook her head: "No—I won't—"

"I'll take you home—get in." He looked about uneasily, pushed her.

She sank into the corner—taking up as little room as possible, turning her head from him.

He drove. She wondered in a remote, shivering way where they were going—what he would say. She looked over the side of the car and in a frantic, wild self-pity fancied herself under its wheels. Easy—that would be easy—

They were going up a hill rough with cobblestones and on. She could see the water and a million lights, all yellow sparkling on the shore across the bay. And they went to the end of the street where a little plateau hung just above the quarry like a shelf stuck out between the quiet, vast eternity of sea and sky.

He glanced at her and waited.

She looked upward. The clouds were massy, black, flung out across the heavens as though some giant artist made the scene. Then the clouds, like some majestic curtain, parted and in their rift was a luminous amber and the green of waters, pale, but lighted. The beauty smote her, sent a melting through her heart. And she was crying. But she wished him not to know.

Finally he said: "Why did you do this?"

"I don't know—you see—"

"You didn't believe me! You thought I went to that dinner. Lord, I can't believe you'd stoop to this—"

"No—I didn't! I wanted to see you. I thought you'd be finished. We could take a ride—" Now that her voice was found, that it came tremulous and eager, she looked to him—"Oh, you see, I never thought you'd take it so—you frightened me—"

Her defense cowered, turned faint before the coldness; the scathing in his searing eyes. "Lord! Add lies to it!"

It struck her sharp like a sword; like lightning splitting her mind. She snapped the door of the car, went to dash out.

He pulled her back. She flashed in a frenzy: "Let go! You let me go! I will—" She had a wild idea to rush to the edge of the cliff, hurl herself over. His arm bound her. She tried to beat it off: "I will! You let me go. I don't care—"

He said stonily: "Don't get excited. You can go home if you want. We can start now. It's up to you—"

She hunched down, covering her face with her hands: "You're cruel! Oh, so—I did it! Yes! I don't know why. I was wild. Everything. Frightened. Oh, now you're hating me—you look so. I wouldn't do this to you. No matter what you did! No— Let me go. You can't stop me. Ho—hold me here! How long? When you're gone I can come back alone—anywhere—"

She grew shrill, incoherent. And suddenly turned her head against the seat, terrible little moans rushing to her lips.

He put his arm about her: "Well—this won't do any good. No use now. Don't cry about it! Why—well, it doesn't matter. I don't care. I never thought you'd do a thing like that—why should you? I've tried to be square, haven't I?"

His words drummed down to her across a century of pain. "I don't know how you could! I've never lied to you. But you'd come sneaking down there—"

"Oh, don't—"

"Well—you did, anyway. Tufts saw it! It's shameful—"

She put his arm from her. And now a calm that was heavier and more unsupportable than frenzy came like a weight. It was a still thing, yet it throbbed and had voices. She listened to it and to him.

"I can't stand this—that's all. We can't get by with it." And each time that he recalled her coming, he seemed the more aghast—the more infuriated: "What right had you? How could you? Lord—it's sordid! I never dreamed you'd stoop to this—"

She gave a little broken cry: "No! And did I? Oh—you think I dreamed that I could ever be brought to this? Oh—do you? A year ago?—Even months ago—Do you? I wonder if you think that?"

He drew in his mouth, sinking his teeth against it.

She went on: "No! Now you say I stoop to things. Oh, yes! And you hate me—"

He slumped down heavily, pounding the steering wheel with his fist. "Yes—you're right. It's my fault—all of it—Lord!"

And after a long while: "Well—it's done now—"

Each sentence builded between them a wall—a cold insensate thing. She felt driven into a void—an empty desolation.

"Take me home—don't say any more. I see—well—"

He kept pounding his fist, like a dirge. "I don't see what to do."

She repeated helplessly: "Never mind—oh, let us go—anywhere."

But as they turned toward the Mission, as they passed Sixteenth Street, a terrible faintness passed hotly through her. She whispered, "Barry—Barry."

He said, "Well."

"I don't know what to do—you feel so—just the same—"

"Don't bother—what of it—"

"And to-morrow—"

"Well—oh, I don't care—I can't help it now."

They were at the door. She held her head down, looking at her hands, that she could see but faintly in the dark. She said, pitifully: "You have no love now? None?"

He didn't answer.

She touched his arm, ran her fingers down it. "It seems strange, Barry. I never thought—you seem so far away—well—"

He took her hand a moment. Then he pressed it. He repeated again and again, "Oh, well."

And suddenly he grabbed the key from her hand. He said: "Go in. To-morrow will be time—to-morrow we can talk."

She smiled. Tears poured down her cheeks. She laughed. "No, we won't—I know. Will you kiss me?—do."

CHAPTER LXXIV

SILENCE

HER room was gray, bleak. She walked into it uncertainly—sat on the bed.

And she was trembling. The veins along her throat and up about her ears ran with fire. Their heat whirled through her. A long while she sat motionless in this faint, overpowering weakness.

Suddenly his voice, like an angry presence, struck across the room: "I can't stand it! That's all—we can't get by!" She sprang to her feet, holding to the bedpost.

And as she stood, there rushed against her with a blasting starkness the things he had said. More terrible now, more final—open hands beating her down.

Oh, shameful. Oh, stooped to this! Incredible!

Two hours ago she had pulled on her hat, jabbing the hatpin into her scalp. Two hours ago this had not happened. Oh, if it could be two hours ago once more—

She crept to the window, raised it softly, knelt there, her head buried in her arms. And burned on her eyes was the image of his face, leaden white, accusing—yes—scorning, hating.

Ended! He would never forgive this.

It crushed her; obliterated pride. She was an abject thing stealing through a corridor, loitering at a door, cowering against the wall. She saw herself so—only so.

And now, if he had come to the door and called her, if he had reached down and touched her hand, she wouldn't have stirred—wouldn't have met his eyes. No—go away—let him never see her again. This feeling remained. And through the night each time his image passed her thought recoiled in shame. She dreaded going down to the office—dreaded the nearness of his window.

That next day it seemed to her that everything drifted in a gray mist, and she herself was cold, utterly chilled, because the mist had got into her veins and was killing her.

She didn't look for him. Five o'clock that afternoon she went hurrying down Montgomery Street, and though it was a bright, vital day, with sun and a merry breeze all about the buildings, she sped onward, feeling herself driven, voices at her ears.

She hated to go home—into the kitchen—talk with Jennie—meet Jonathan's chuckle. She wished to walk until she was lost in a desolation that had no end. Her thought already dwelt there.

She kept walking. Suddenly, in her imagination, he overtook her, touched her hand, murmuring breathlessly: "Chickie, what of it? I don't care now. Wasn't so worse!" She hurried, half running. If only he might do a thing like that.

Days of this. She had no heart to look from her window, no courage even to raise her eyes. Once she saw his shadow. The blood swept with such wild heat to her face that she caught her desk, steadying herself.

Janina, sitting opposite, saw this. She dropped a note: "Why the panic, baby? Why have we no more balcony scenes, sweet Juliet? Little lovers' quarrel, I take it. Cheer up! Kissing and making up is awfully cozy, doncher know?"

Chickie crumbled the note, and a moment later, fearful because of the hot stinging in her eyes, she went to the dressing room. She sat on the window ledge.

Then Janina was at her side, slipping a friendly arm about Chickie's waist. "Didn't mean that, old dear. Not sore, are you?"

Chickie shook her head.

"Something serious? Not broken off, is it?"

She tried to make some flippant remark. The most she could accomplish was a snap of her fingers and a pathetic: "Well—so it goes, Janina!"

"Oh, rubbish! You had a scrap, I suppose, and neither of you is big enough to come around and say: 'My fault, old thing—forget it!' That's the way with a woman always. Not big enough to bend! Why can't you hop to it and take the blame for once?"

Chickie laughed: "Thanks, Janina! You're such a fountain of wisdom."

"And all culled from experience, my dear—so it's good. Take it! It behooves woman to be independent. Independent enough to be wrong once in a while and get away with it. As

for me, I accost the world thusly: 'Of course I sin! What about it?' Put a brazen face on it, ole dear, and the world slinks off like a pup with its foolish tail of prejudices stuck between its legs. Try it!"

Oddly enough this chatter of Janina's brightened her; broke the tension of her emotions. And now, going back to her work, she could look to that night of withering excitement without a fainting rush of shame. She said to herself in surprise: "Was it such a sordid thing to do? Oh—that I should never lift my head again?"

Her mind quailed: "Yes—it was—spying on him—sneaking into that corridor—"

But love—couldn't love overlook that? Would love keep only that memory of her and banish all the sweeter, happier ones?

She kept thinking of this—one memory brought another, like children running through a bright field, snapping flowers.

• Rides they had taken about the city, claiming as theirs the beauty of hills and water; pointing out a golden star, shinier than others; tracing a ripple of copper in a sky of jade.

Merry things he had done—bringing her the ugly black waterdogs because they might delight her capricious fancy, then kneeling on the floor, grinning as he unwrapped them. Why—only that night such a little while ago, dropping the nugget in her glove—

Moments of piercing tenderness when he took her face in his hands—

Could all this be wiped out so readily? All this forgotten? She could as well take the pulse from her heart, and ask it yet to beat.

Then could he dismiss it so? Not a pang? Not a backward look? Oh—he must be thinking, too. He must be seeing images—

Now he came so close she could almost hear his breath; feel his hand. Now she looked over to his window and whispered: "Oh—come—why don't you?"

That night she wrote to him. She could take the blame. It was all hers. And couldn't he forget? Couldn't he let it pass?

"After all that was so beautiful, would you have it end like this, Barry? And will you think of me always doing a mean

and shameful thing? That is hard. If I could blot that out—won't you let me? Won't you remember other things? So many of them. And they were glad, weren't they?

"Perhaps you know what these days have been. Perhaps you guess how all those things you said keep coming back and I can hear them always.

"I hear them and they shout so loud that all the laughter and all the songs we knew are silenced. If you would only come—if you would just do that—Will you?"

She ran down the block and slid the letter in the mail box, staring through the opening after it. In the morning he would get it.

What would he think? Would he tear it up—angry—fling it in the waste basket? Would he look over to Tufts and remember that Tufts had seen and might be guessing?

Or would he seize it gladly? Would it make his veins glow? And he would come rushing at noontime to meet her? Yes—would he?

In her excitement she hurried. Then she saw the door of the Blakes' house opening; saw Jimmy's tall figure swinging down the steps. She turned and ran feverishly around the corner.

Jimmy passed but he didn't see her. He had his hands dug in his pockets. He looked big and full of power.

She watched until he was out of sight. A sudden loneliness enveloped her—a sudden realization that she was, indeed, alone. That Jimmy and Mary were no longer in her life. They couldn't be.

She had put them out—every one. Except him. Except Barry. Pushed the whole world aside that she might have him.

Now he was going—gone perhaps. And there was no one else—no other thing. Her life was wholly his.

She grew frightened, seeing herself thus isolated. She struck the fear from her mind. No—wait—to-morrow—

By noon she was in a kind of panic, reluctant to leave the office—reluctant to brook the disappointment that might be hers.

She waited till Janina was gone. Then she went swiftly through the alley to the restaurant where they usually met. With a shivering uncertainty she took their table. She said to the waitress with a bright smile: "I'll wait a while."

So the waitress set places for two.

CHAPTER LXXV

TRUCE

CHICKIE waited. She glanced about the restaurant as though hers was the happiest heart in the world. She nodded to men and girls. But her eyes were on the door. Each time it swung, her breath caught hotly.

And now it was a quarter to one. And the waitress who had served them both a hundred times said: "Will you wait longer?"

Chickie pretended a frown of impatience, saying lightly: "Well—us working girls, you know, haven't a year for lunch." She ordered a sandwich and coffee.

She broke the sandwich, left it untasted on her plate; swallowed the coffee, keeping her eyes lowered over the cup. She thought: "Oh—writing that letter! Begging him! But he wants it ended; wanted an excuse."

The bitterness of this suspicion lit flames in her heart. They fed on the hope of the morning, consumed it. She went back to work, shaken, convinced now. He would never come again.

This conviction strengthened and with it a terror—a wildness. No—he dared not—after all these months—all they had meant—end it now? And it seemed to her that she would rush after him, wind her hands about him—demanding—challenging—

Her emotions exhausted her—left her finally stilled, without impulse to think or to act. Let him go—let him do as he wished—

Just before five the phone rang. It was he. He said: "The car's parked in the alley. Will you go down there? Wait for me? I'll be right along."

A tense, unnatural quiet in his tone. It laid a fear on her thought—made her unwilling to confront him.

Reaching the alley, her steps dragged. He might censure her; might allude to that night and say again: "Stooped to that, Chickie! I didn't think you could. Tufts saw—"

She would run away from that—wouldn't listen—

And she crept along so slowly that he was already in the

car, the engine started. He got out and without facing her, helped her in.

He said abruptly: "I got your letter, Chickie. Shall we go somewhere and eat now?"

"No. I'm not hungry."

"Drive then?"

"Yes—if you want—"

Strained, unhappy like that.

They wedged through the traffic and were finally in the park. The silence was a tearing thing like a hook pulling on the cords of one's heart.

She closed her eyes. They passed the beds where the rhododendrons were gorgeous in purple and white and rose. He pointed to them: "Color—haven't they? Never saw them so fine."

She answered: "Barry, did you come only because I wrote the letter?"

He evaded. "I don't want you to think I hold it against you. Or that I'm remembering it—"

"Oh—but I know you are."

"No—only it shows—"

She watched him in an anguish, noted that his mouth, full-cut and boyish, was now pale, even drawn. She whispered with pain: "What does it show, Barry?"

"What I should have seen in the beginning if I wasn't blind; if I wasn't so completely—oh, well—what's the use now?"

"Oh—say it—you have to—"

"Well, the whole thing has got beyond us. We're flying at each other. And it's too hard for you. You can't endure it. You think it's wrong. You've thought that from the beginning and it makes you frantic."

She clasped and unclasped her hands.

He went on bitterly, his eyes glued to the road: "If you hadn't looked at it so, you wouldn't have doubted me. None of these things would have come between us. You could have been happy. But you never were. And lately it's just been one scene after another—"

"No—oh, most of the time—you know, now—"

"What did you say the other night, Chickie? You said that a year ago you couldn't have done that thing but that now you could because you were brought to it! You mean that I've brought you to it! I've lowered you! That's what you mean."

You've made me feel like an outcast—like a monster. I could go shoot myself. . . ."

"Oh, don't—never mind. I see. You want to go—you want it ended . . ." She moved from him—kept staring at her folded hands. A tear fell.

He saw that and looked away, but then back and saw her dark lashes glistening. He slowed the car, stopping it against the trees, covered her hand: "Don't feel so. You don't want to feel so—"

A struggling sound, but half laugh: "No—but I do. Barry—you want it ended? You want to leave me? Do you? Do you?" Even as she spoke, faintness bore over her. She sank lower, let her head rest against the seat, repeating dimly: "That's what you want—"

"No—no—but if we can't go on, Chickie—listen—if we're only going to be doubting and watching and nagging each other—you can see—I haven't wanted to change. I was happy—"

She pressed his hand between the two of hers, shutting her eyes: "But now? Barry, now?"

"I don't know. I don't want other things like that—"

"Oh, no, no—" She turned her cheek against his arm and for the first time raised her eyes to his. They shone. They were living things, pleading. She said, trembling: "No—Barry, can you forget all that was sweet between us because of that? Oh—can you put from you all the happier things? And you want to leave me? Alone? Oh, I have no one—and nothing but you, now—You know that. Do you mean that you don't love me? But if you did a thousand shameful things to me I could forgive them all. I would want you still—"

She smiled, but there were tears in her eyes. It made their beauty piercing. They hurt him; they flashed memories at him. He kissed them—kissed her lips, murmuring with impetuous swiftness: "Oh—forget it, Chickie! Don't be mournful about it. We don't care!"

"Oh, really—and you love me—love me still—"

"Of course—"

"And you don't want to leave me?"

"No—not now—No—I don't—"

She was mute because of the joy that ran sudden and sharp, like a dazzling wave, over a dark pool of sadness. She laced her fingers in his. After a long while she said, simply: "Barry—never leave me—will you? I can never let you go."

His face blanched. "No—don't speak of it, Chickie—don't imagine things—You do that—"

She laughed: "Oh—but I won't—I won't—"

She meant this. She was filled with peace. They would go back to the glad beginning—into the sun again—carefree. He should not look at her with dubious, unhappy eyes, but only to see how dear she was. And she would never question him again. She would be blithe, flippant, pretty as a flower. For this was the Chickie he loved.

So she laughed merrily at him from her window; she met him gayly in the alley. Even when he phoned twice that week, saying he couldn't see her, he had to work, she responded breezily: "Tish—work if ye will! As for me I loaf, Mr. Red!"

Sometimes a stealthy fear kept creeping about her thoughts, whispering: "He's not so eager. He's growing moody. You don't hold him as you did. Notice that he doesn't tell you how beautiful you are!" She shut this down with a contemptuous: "I know it by now, don't I? He's said it enough. Why bore me with repetitions?"

She had to say things like this to herself often. No—she was not going to keep tab on his words—not going to watch and nag him—make him feel like an outcast—no—

But there were times when she was hard pressed to smile. When she had to take their moments of tenderness when he would reach for her hand, pulling her to him with a warm impulsive, "Love you—of course!"—when she had to take these and hold them fast to her heart; going over them; glorifying them.

The night of the lecture they had dinner in town. It was nearly eight. Neither of them had spoken of the meeting at Bess Abbot's house. Finally Chickie said: "Aren't we going to the lecture?"

He answered in a subdued, strained tone: "Do you want to?"

She was stung. It let her know his uneasiness; his dread of another clash. But she answered blithely: "Of course! I may get learned myself one of these days and climb your Parnassus heights! Who knows?"

Yet when she saw the quiet, even the paleness, of his face brighten; when she saw him grow vivid talking to Basil Arthur and then to Ila Moore, the old tightness drew at her throat.

The voice of fear loudened. "Notice you don't excite him so. Notice he was quiet at dinner. Look at him now!"

But she went over to Ila's side, slipped her hand in Ila's arm with a careless, sweet laugh, listened, threw in capricious comments, rewarded when she saw his eyes light, meeting her own.

Noontime the next day Janina said: "Congratulations, old dear! Some honeymoon the baby picks!"

Her amazement was so great Janina stared. Then shrugged. "Of course, my dear, if you wanted to keep it dark—"

"What do you mean, Janina? I haven't the faintest idea."

"Oh, no—not at all. But it's nice to have friends who own a steamship line, isn't it? Take us around the world on our honeymoon."

Her face paled. Janina saw that, and her hands trembled.

Chickie said: "What is it, Janina? I honestly don't know."

"Of all things, old lady! Don't tell me the boy is going on a world tour with the fair Ila and her party and leaving you behind!"

CHAPTER LXXVI

ACCUSATION

THE stricken, ashy look in Chickie's face shook Janina's poise. She said bluffly: "Guess I got the goods mixed, ole dear. Don't get the panic."

"What did you hear, Janina? Are you kidding me?"

"Not if I know it. I understood it was all settled. The Gulf Steamship Company is sending one of their boats on a world tour. That's Moore's company. I heard that Ila was going with several of her friends as guests."

"And Barry was to be one of them?"

"So the story had it."

Chickie said nothing. She clenched her hands on her chair. Painfully, after a clamorous silence: "There must be some mistake, Janina."

"Sure! Well, you poor infant! Go white and faint! Don't expect the boy to run away and leave without giving notice, do you?"

A high, uncertain laugh: "Such a chance, ole dear! You took my breath away. If I'm to go on this world tour, you know, I want time to gather the festive glad rags. And if I'm to be the girl he left behind him, why, I'll have to invest in a few dozen sheets to catch the briny tears!"

Inwardly her thought trembled with the shock. Could this be? World tour—Barry going—opportunity like that—

He would want to seize it. Of course he would! And perhaps he was only waiting for some tender moment when her heart was his to ask if she would hold him back; if she would keep this pleasure from him. Oh, he might say, pressing her hands, grinning: "All right with you, frail? I'll come back—you don't care—surely—" He might do it carelessly like that.

Her thoughts flew back over the last weeks; now it saw coldness in his eyes; now it heard weariness in his voice. Oh, his arms, even folding about her, were lax—

But she wouldn't judge; wouldn't condemn. Wait—wait till he came that evening. Ask him, very flippantly. Never let him see that she feared.

And if he wished to go with Ila Moore, he could. Oh, indeed! She would say and laugh as she said it: "The door is always open, Mr. Red!"

In a lightning excitement, scenes flashed through her brain. She stood at her bureau that night drawing a little brush across her fine, arched brows. She said to her image: "I should worry! Any old time! What is to be, will be." A little hysterical laugh and quoting what she had heard on Ila Moore's lips—"The best of all possible worlds, you know—that's us!"

She put the brush carefully in its tiny box, stared at it a long while. She bit the tears back from her eyes. She said to herself: "Oh—God—"

But she waited until they were parked at the beach and he slumped back, comfortable, his arm carelessly about her. She twitched his sleeve, her voice high: "I hear as how my darling Red is invited on a world tour."

A sharp intake of breath, startled: "Who told you, Chickie?"

"Didn't he want her to know? But she's clever—she is!"

"It doesn't matter. I didn't think any one knew about me."

"Janina told me. Is it true, Barry? You're invited?"

"Yes—"

"Quite otherwise, isn't it? Quite salubrious, I'd say."

"Rather—yes—"

Her voice pitched higher—faint: "And you're going, Barry? Are you?"

Pause stretched out in anguish. Then crisply: "No."

"You're going to turn down a chance like that, Barry? Are you? For me? Because of me?"

He looked at her steadfastly and smiled: "You didn't expect me to take it, frail? Did you?"

She had hold of his hands. She pressed them with a swift, trembling cry against her face—to kiss them—to shut out that stillness in his eyes. She kept murmuring, "You do love me then? You do!"

But she didn't look at him—didn't want to see his face, white, anxious, tender. She was often seeing this subdued, gentle look. And she didn't want it. She wanted the vital, impulsive fire that had so won her from the beginning. She wanted his eyes to grin, his mouth to purse teasingly. Oh—bonny, like that! She loved him so.

When she saw this vividness striking like a light about him as when they went to the lectures; when she saw the ardent

youth uppermost in his face, she whispered, terrified to her thought: "He's living now. I don't fire him so. Not any more. I'm not enough—"

It occurred to her that he perceived this too—that he read her fear. For often after these evenings he came eagerly, bringing books, shoving them at her, bringing a picture, some little trinket. He said boyishly: "Here, frail! Not so down-cast, please. Why for?"

Tears filled her eyes. She thought: "He brings me these in place of love. He wants to make it up to me—"

Yet she clung to him the more desperately; gave him the brimming tenderness of her heart. Bind him to her in these thousand aching chords of joy. Never should he be free again. She taxed him: "I love you, Barry—so! Enough for both of us!"

He laughed: "Don't say that, Chickie. One is never enough for two."

She wished to answer: "Oh, I know that now! I can see. I won't keep you. The door is open, Barry—Go!"

But her lips would never frame the words. Nor would she even ask: "You'll do your own share of the loving, will you?" She wouldn't risk that. She only repeated with a gayety that tore wounds in her heart: "Yes! Mine is enough for ten."

When a woman loves enough for ten she loves far too much for one. It was pathetic and in a way terrible that she should realize this as she did. That she should see him fighting to keep his feeling—gentle to her—making a burden of it—not knowing.

More terrible that she should want him, even so. That she should raise the pretty eyes to his, draw his head down; hold his spirit with her beauty, with the completeness of her devotion.

One night at the close of the lecture—an occasion when Ila Moore was not present, Basil Arthur, hurrying to leave, said to Barry: "You'll decide to come, I hope. You should!"

It chanced that his face paled; that he gave some inaudible response and shrugged. She noticed.

They drove home through the park. Neither of them spoke. They swung around the Tea Gardens, parking at the lake. He smoked silently, stretching his legs out, his profile toward her.

She said in a hushed, frightened voice: "What are you

thinking, Barry? I know! That I'm keeping you from all that—oh, you want to go—you want to go—"

He didn't answer. She ran her hand up and down along his arm swiftly: "Is this so, Barry?—Oh, you should tell me—"

"No—Chickie, listen, that's decided, finished. Don't go back—"

"But you are! You're gloomy about it."

"Might be other things, Chickie."

She could scarcely draw her breath. "Barry, do you mean me? And us? You're gloomy about that? Oh, I've felt it!"

He answered bluntly: "Tufts has taken his son into the office. He's come back from the East. That lets me out, I can see. That means I begin over again, practically. At twenty-five—not so good!"

Thoughts charged her brain in bolts: "Lets you out? Then you're free? You could go? Nothing to hold you back but me—Oh, is that it, Barry? Really, you would like to go, wouldn't you?"

He shrugged. A quizzical, uneven laugh. "Well—look here, frail, it's a rather fetching proposition, isn't it? Four or five brilliant people along—all over the world. . . . Listens sweet, doesn't it? And not such years ago, if my memory serves me right, you wanted to take a little yachting trip, didn't you?"

"Only for a week. This is to be months—maybe a year."

"But I'm not going, am I?"

She said aghast: "But you want to. Oh—brilliant people along. You're thinking of it—I can see. I'm not enough—not any more."

He seized her hands, pressed them: "Chickie! For the love of heaven! Don't! I'm not going. I'm not thinking of it, now. I tell you I'm not!"

"Oh, no!" She gave a little frantic cry. "No! That's why you're so quiet—so still! That's why you sit here silent. Oh, but you laugh with them. I've noticed. You want them. You do!"

She grew wild. "I've seen, Barry, I know. You love Ila Moore. You're tired of me. You want to get away. I have no brain."

"Oh—Chickie—stop—don't let's degrade each other! Don't do that."

She laughed hysterically, biting her lips. "Degrade? Why,

we've done that already. And now you compare me to her. You shove books at me. All the time you're thinking of her—wishing I was brilliant. But I'm not. You can go—You go—Go—You won't throw things up to me! You won't!"

He clenched her arms: "Don't say that! Don't you dare! I've never—not for a moment. Oh, Chickie—this is awful—this is sordid—Oh, Lord—"

She put her hands over her face and began to cry.—

CHAPTER LXXVII

THE BREAK

CHICKIE'S hands winding under his; Chickie's eyes wet against his face. He felt them. Never get away from that—clinging to him . . .

They followed him into his room, repeating with a shrill wildness the scene of the night. He walked back and forth trembling, pushing his hair from his forehead, saying to himself, "Oh, Lord!"

He saw her putting her hands pitifully over her face, crying. His pace quickened.

In this flaming disturbance he was aware of one restive, unalterable desire—escape. Get away from this—no use trying. He had tried.

And the thing he had dreaded happened—flying at each other's throats. Couldn't go on now—hopeless—utterly. One scene after another.

He sat at his desk, pressing his fist against his mouth. Her fingers crept to his neck, drew his head down. They were a deadly weight. He wished to unfasten them. The pretty eyes held him; the little pointed chin trembled.

And he was forced to look at them. They dwelt in his imagination, living, tender, accusing. They were a torture.

They brought before him the vision of himself. He saw this now, relentless and scathing, as another might; saw the hot, impetuous youth taking with such imperious demand her sweetness, her beauty.

He was repelled by this image, for now the senses that had cried out so blatantly were quiet and the flush of expectance in his veins dead. He knew this; had known it for some time.

A long while since Chickie had drawn him from the shadow to his window; since he had thought of her a thing of lilies and stars sitting so brightly above him.

He was years—many years—removed from the buoyant, laughing fellow who had driven her down the highway that first Sunday, falling asleep against her arm, reading poetry to

her; boasting of his "Lost Days"; stealing the kiss she didn't mean to give.

And from that other whose heart bounded so madly seeing her beauty—claiming it for his own.

He could look at Chickie quietly now for he was grown used to the chiseled delicacy of her features; accustomed to her flippant caprice. They no longer startled his pulse with joy.

His mind disputed her sway of his senses; appraised coldly her attraction. Pretty thing, full of love, the lure of her had gone thundering to his heart. But it sent no deep echoes to his spirit. He was aware of this long before he admitted it. He had denied it, tried to force a bond here between them, bringing her books, stirring her thought. And she had laid her soft cheek on his, murmuring, "Tell me you love me. Tell me that, Barry—"

So he had kept on in a kind of blind persistence. He wouldn't be the one to end it. Go on, even into misery rather than face the issue; rather than meet the frantic, hurt reproach in her eyes.

It had come, despite him; despite her. Now, even in its cruel bitterness was the touch of relief. Better so. Not suited to each other. They could never have made a go of it; they would only perpetuate their mistake.

As he thought this, the image of Chickie, biting her lips—telling him with such desperate anguish: "You go—Go! You'll not throw things up to me!"—That image stalked into his mind and shook him.

But after a long while he said: "Better for her, too." They couldn't go back now—could never make it up. He couldn't. Of his love there was left but a disturbing pity. And even in this was a tinge of boyish resentment. If Chickie hadn't looked at it so—if she hadn't watched him, waiting for hurts?—Yet he knew that no matter what Chickie's attitude had been, sooner or later his tumult would have stilled.

He meant to write her a letter. Let them not see each other again. He was going away. Not on that trip. She shouldn't think that—but going away—had to get away—

He drew out the paper, but when he started to write, his vivid imagination brought her so piercingly before him; all his tenderness aroused. Hurt her so—make her chin double like that—

Hours later he came back to the task. He had to. Get out of this town—and soon—

"You say that I don't love you any more, Chickie. And you blame me for this. But am I the only one that has changed? And did I seek this? You know that I haven't. I would have been glad to go on always as we did in the beginning. I never thought it could be otherwise.

"It is, though. You see this as well as I. You've felt it, you say. And there is nothing for us to do, that I can see, except to meet it.

"But I don't see why this fact, Chickie, should rob us of the past, or why we should censure and hurt each other in our regret. I loved you and you cared for me. Because this emotion was not rugged enough to last is no reason why we should shame it and ourselves now.

"And if you can make yourself look at it quietly, isn't it much better to have a break now than later? Going on as we have these last weeks we would only end in hating and reviling each other. The parting would be shameful where it need only be sad. Do you want this? I don't. Why should we sacrifice all the happiness we knew together merely to this bitterness of its end? We shouldn't!"

Then he went back to that past, asserting their right to it, asserting its beauty. And he recalled a dozen incidents and said he'd give his heart now if they could have remained joyous like that, always.

Chickie, reading the letter, drinking back tears, was swept into the glow of the yesterday; swept past the cruel shock of his going into the warmth of his regrets.

The first part of the letter she forgot and the last telling of his plans to leave she ignored. But these paragraphs, vital as his hand clasping hers, she took to her heart—she read them again and again until the words became a song of hope.

He wished it could have remained. And couldn't it? Oh, couldn't they start again?

She phoned: "You'll come and see me—just for a moment, Barry?"

"Only make it harder, Chickie."

"Not for me—"

"All right. It may be late. I won't have long—"

She went into her room and dressed—a warm, melting sadness running up about her throat and near to her eyes. But

it was the sadness of music that holds in its deepest pain the undertone of joy.

Only when he came—late that evening after Jonathan and Jennie were in bed—only then and she saw the whiteness of his face, the drawn, thin look about his mouth, did she comprehend this undertone.

They stood looking at each other. They talked quietly. "Barry, I didn't mean what I said . . . you remember, I was excited. I was frantic."

"Don't think of it, Chickie. I knew you didn't."

Then, oddly enough, he told her a joke he had heard . . . told her funny old scraps of notes that he came across when he sorted all his papers.

She lowered her head. Finally she said: "You're going to be gone long, Barry? A long, long time?"

"Most likely. I'm not sure. There's nothing to lose now by going. I may visit my mother. She's been ill, you know."

She glanced up and saw a momentary restless light in his eyes. She said with a vague amazement: "You seem glad to go. Barry—" then her heart shook. "You are glad to go—"

She spoke softly with a little broken question in her breath. Her hand of its own wild longing trembled and searched for his.

He took it, drawing in his mouth, trembling: "Chickie—well— isn't it better so? What else—what else can we do? You see it. We can't go back. Chickie, listen—wasn't the love we had beautiful—"

She closed her eyes, standing quiet in the darkness that fell upon her mind. "It's over, Barry? Oh, you speak of a thing that is dead—"

Now her voice dropped lower; now her heart bowed with its deadly weight. She swayed a little. He steadied her with his arm. He murmured gently: "Chickie—oh, can I help it? I wouldn't have it so. You blame me—you blame me for it all—"

She said with a little, breathless sob: "No—not blaming you. Oh—I gave you all I had—oh, all and now I don't know what to do without you. And I can't ever take it back—"

He answered, his face an ashen pale: "I gave my best to you. I gave you the first love I ever knew. I gave it gladly. Even now I wouldn't want to take it back—"

"Even now—" a faint cry. "Then it is so! All so! You

will go? Oh, you are going away to leave me. You're glad to go? No—oh, this can't be so—"

She pressed her open hands against him, found his arms about her. She lay quiet against him. After a while she whispered: "Barry, kiss me—"

His lips were cold. They touched her closed eyes, pressed her mouth. She felt as though she were lying in a coffin and now on her face they dropped the chill reverence of death.

CHAPTER LXXVIII

EBB OF HOPE

SHE let him go.

She moved into her room as one mystified in a dream of terror. Her lips repeated vaguely: "Going away—leaving—" And she began to pick up the clothes scattered on chairs, hanging them carefully in the closet. Numbness entered with frozen quiet on her thought.

After this she sat on her bed, her hands folded. Presently tears went slowly trickling to the corners of her mouth. She wiped them off, saying to herself in surprise: "Why am I sitting here? Crying?" and then more quietly: "It won't do any good to cry. Don't cry about it."

She turned out the light, lay staring into the dark—aware that just below the surface of this icy calm was a wild thing of anguish, waiting. It would leap up and throttle her. She held it down.

She was afraid of it. She kept her hands clasped on her heart. She closed her eyes, pretending to sleep.

But suddenly she was sitting upright, moist, shaking, saying aloud: "God—O my God!"

Half tumbling from the bed, she ran into the hall—then cautiously to the front door—opened it, peered up and down the block. It was empty—silent. The air came chill on her bare shoulders. She stood leaning against the door, staring into the street. Its bleakness fastened on her mind.

She was alone now. He was gone. Face, with the vital eyes alight; hands closing on hers—snatched away in the darkness.

The moment of parting returned to her. His lips so cold, touching hers; his voice shaking: "Better so. Isn't it better this way, Chickie?"

The two of them, talking to each other like that! They two that had so loved; so bound their hearts with all these thousand tender bonds—

She shivered. She pressed her face against the door. The

stark finality of the thing that had happened overwhelmed her. It let loose memories in a storm. These beat her. She crept back to the bed, huddling in the blankets, trying to get warm.

The gray waste she had seen in the dream opened and claimed her. Its desolate waters came running to her feet. She watched them, in a baffled, incredulous terror, looking this way and that. Oh, surely they would not rise; they would not mantle her. A hand would reach out and grab her back—

Even yet, she hoped.

Especially, after she had fought off the shock of awakening, after she had stepped into the singing May sun on her way to work next morning, Barry telling her it was over; coming to give her that chill kiss of parting—a lifelong parting—This would not be the tragic finish of their love.

He had not told her where he was going nor when. She had a childish expectance that he would. There would be some link between them still.

But as the day wore on he didn't phone; no shadow passed his window. She grew alarmed. She began to vision him closing his desk, stuffing papers into a valise, grabbing up his hat. A moment more and it would be too late.

She picked up the phone, gave his number. The stenographer answered: "Mr. Dunne isn't in. . . . No, we don't expect him back—I believe he left for New York to-day. . . . No, we haven't his mailing address as yet. Leave your number and I'll let you know."

Chickie answered faintly: "I'll call again."

A sudden fury that was cold and yet swept up like a flame seized her—the first fury she had felt against him. He should treat her like this—take the matter into his own hands, push her aside. She went into the dressing room and stood at the window. From here she could see the bay and boats gliding into the stream.

And she fancied him sitting on one; fancied his mouth thin and drawn as it had protested: "I gave you my best, didn't I? I gave you the first love I ever knew." Remembering that, she trembled—she let the warmth soften her.

Then she went back to her typewriter and phoned the boarding house. They knew nothing here; the proprietor was out. She'd be in at five most likely. But she believed Mr. Dunne had given up his room. It was for rent now.

Her mind emptied of its straining hope.

Janina, seeing her with a fixed, white stare on her face, paused: "Time to go, baby. Shall I get your hat?" Janina did this, brought it to her. "Don't mind, ole thing, if I stroll along with you, do you? Got something to tell you. We'll drop in around the corner and have a cup of tea. How's that?"

Immediately Chickie's face and her heart burned. Janina had something to say. . . . Perhaps?—So she went with her to hear.

"Well, old lady, not going to break your heart over that, are you?"

"Over what, Janina dear?"

"Have sense, Chickie. Can't blame the boy for grabbing a chance like that, can you?"

"He isn't going on the tour, Janina."

"You don't say! Then why the weeps all day? Why the whispered phoning?"

She would have liked to bluff. It took all her control to keep her hands still, her eyes lowered—smarting with a wild pain. "Well—his mother is ill. He's going to New York."

Janina smiled. She said, quietly: "You shouldn't be so grieved over the health of the lad's mother."

"Oh, I'm not! He may be gone a long while."

Very softly: "And you're afraid he isn't coming back, Chickie?"

The cup in Chickie's hand shook and the tea spattered to the table. She laughed at that, became absorbed, mopping it up. She wished to jump up, shout at Janina, run from the place.

"Well, this is what I've got to say, ole thing: Don't worry about him. It's the quickest way on earth to lose him. Worry digs the grave for love deeper and swifter than cruelty or sin. If he's gone for good, ole dear, then he is! There's nothing on earth will drag him back. And tears make a sea that love won't sail. I know."

Chickie smiled: "Why all the wisdom, to-day, Janina?"

"I've had my eyes opened lately, 'Chickie. No use to tell you you were making a fool of yourself, then; but there is, now! Oh, by the way, did you know that Ila's party starts to-morrow? One of Moore's boats on the last lap of its tour is picking them up. They go through the canal to New York, lay over for a week and make their start from there."

Chickie said: "No—I didn't know that—"

The knowledge sickened her. He was going with them, of course. Clear enough to see it all now. He loved Ila Moore—brilliant and a poet. Ila Moore loved him.

She remembered the radiant flush on Ila's face that evening so long ago when Barry and she had met after an absence of some three years. Remembered Ila awake when she returned from the pool so late that night. Ila wished to talk of him; wished to know if Chickie was a very old friend of his.

But that was the night of glory—the night when the darkness closed about them like an immense black flower, made them one with the holy beauty of the scene; the night he said for the first time, "I love you, Chickie—tell me, oh, I have to know—you love me—say it!" And so she had not talked of him to Ila—too sacred that.

Now into her pain came a dismal misery. Lied to her—cheaped her like that—going away with them after all his hot denials.

She said to Janina: "No—I didn't know that—"

"Leaves at noon to-morrow. Wish the sweet poet had made me a guest—I'd dance to her tune!"

All evening Chickie kept saying to herself: "He wouldn't do that—wouldn't lie about it. He's not going—"

The next morning she asked Lewis if she might leave at eleven o'clock. She had urgent business.

She had found out the name of the boat; the pier where it was docked. She went there—frightened but driven. Even hurrying to the water she thought with a bitter sob: "If she should see me! Oh—" It seemed to her that this would be the final scene. Yet she went on.

A little crowd waited. Girls with many boxes of candy, arms laden with flowers. Mothers with tears in their eyes. Young men, eager, yet laughing nervously.

Chickie edged close to one of these groups.

Suddenly she heard a soft, happy laugh. Ila Moore in a blue tailored suit, blue hat and a fisher neck-piece brushed so close she could have touched her hand. Basil Arthur, another girl, another man, then Ila's mother.

But Barry wasn't there.

CHAPTER LXXIX

BARRY'S LETTER

"THIS may interest you, ole dear." Janina, watching Chickie narrowly, handed a newspaper clipping across the table. They were at lunch. It was the day after the steamer sailed and the item gave the guests in Ila Moore's party. Barry's name was not included.

Chickie read it twice, aware of Janina's shrewd scrutiny.

"Makes it nice that she can give her playmates such an outing, doesn't it? Fancy the eclat of saying to your steady: 'Hit the deck, old kid—off we go to the Riviera! Leave your wallet in your overalls. Dad has the sack! Gold touch like that makes a nice foil for one's charms, doesn't it?'"

"Do you think men consider that, Janina? I mean does a man care about a girl's wealth or the house she lives in?"

"Ask yourself, baby! Is a rose growing in a mire as fair as one blooming among lilies? Women or diamonds—makes no difference—must have the right setting to bring out their fires and deepen their lures."

"A man wouldn't love a girl more for those things? You think he would be attracted by them?"

"He would—and deny it! Just a case of being tricked by his imagination. How is he to know where the girl herself begins and her setting ends? No way! So he endows her with the beauty of her clothes; the fragrance of her favorite perfume; the brilliance of her associates. Stars make the sky darker; sky makes the star brighter! Pity the light that must shine in a smudgy coal oil lamp! No chance—poor thing—"

Chickie laughed—"Not exactly fair in life, is it, Janina?"

"Life doesn't need to be fair. Too many pawns to play with." Janina's lips curled with contemptuous humor. "Speaking of even chances, did you hear about Marjorie Abbot? You didn't! Well, the child got herself engaged once too often and she had to make a marriage of it."

"Not to that limp, sallow Teddy Parks?"

"The same."

"Why did they let her?"

"Use your bean, my dear. Those who take love for fun sometimes find love taking them with consequence—with one of your great and holy purposes, as it were."

Chickie looked at her aghast. "She's only seventeen, Janina."

"It seems her age wasn't asked. Well, only half a hundred of the intimates of the family will ever know of it. In a year or two they'll dismiss it from their thoughts. Mrs. Theodore Parks will be listed among the bon ton wherever and whenever she wishes. But fancy if this happened to Peggy, the cobbler's daughter, or to Flossie, the belle of the factory! If love caught up with them in this nice, friendly way they'd have a fat chance of catching up with a husband, wouldn't they?"

Chickie said, blankly: "Isn't that awful—isn't that a shame? Now her whole life is spoiled."

"Spoiled? My dear simpleton, how do you figure that?"

Chickie trembled. "She didn't love him—it's awful."

Janina shrugged. "Well, this comes of putting dynamite into the hands of infants. No game for babies or amateurs. As I've said before, they can't get away with it, because it gets away with them. Too bad! Discredits the clever players."

Chickie turned impatiently, her heart sickened: "Clever players, Janina! Do you think all life is a joke and a make-believe? Why should any one fool with love?"

"I leave it to the pure and proud to ask. If I were to answer, you wouldn't understand. And as a wise man remarks, it doesn't do to tell the truth to those who do not wish to hear. . . . But I may say, in passing, that there are many who should not fool with freedom. It will make the fool of them."

"Who are your clever ones that get away with it, Janina?"

"Clever, indeed! They are the women, my dear, with a callus where you have a conscience. Conscience is the terror of consequence; the clever do not fear what they eliminate."

"It is hideous, though, to look at life in this way, Janina. In the end what have you?"

"Hell's bells! If you're going to get morbid about it! If you're going to ask, 'Whither thou goest, woman?' How do we know? But we're on our way. Nice, new sea to travel. Lord knows, perhaps, if there be a shore ahead. I don't!

"So the pure and proud, as well as the young and stupid, had better keep to the old lands! Takes a crafty sailor and a

hardy one to keep his boat afloat on these uncharted waters, let alone guiding it to port.

"When others strike out, as witness our young flapper, Marjorie—you see what happens. Boat smashes up. Lucky for her, money throws out a lifeline. You and I and Peggy, the cobbler's maid, in the same predicament, would sink sweetly and unlamented to the seaweed forty fathoms deep!"

Suddenly moist and disturbed, Chickie laughed uneasily; and the next moment her cheeks were blazing, for Janina half read her thought. Janina said mockingly: "When one stays on the old shore she may come to a little grief but not to tragedy. And grief you know is but an emotion. It passes. Tragedy is a fact; it must be borne. What do you hear from the lad, my dear?"

"Only left two days ago, Janina, and he wasn't going on an airplane."

"Will you be stepping out with us a bit, now?"

"I may and then, again, I may not!"

"You don't think that he is going to New York and play the hermit, do you? You don't expect it, if you have any sense. Well—in this day and age, if you want to be a match for a man, keep step with him. Or rather keep two steps ahead of him. Much better for the woman to keep him on the run than to give him the handicap on her. She'll never overtake him if she does. You mind me!"

"Janina, do you think I'm to be forsaken?" Chickie laughed, and for the first time, because of her great inward agitation, she appeared gay and untroubled.

"Well—no! You're not!"

Chickie repeated carelessly: "No—Janina. I'm not! And I shan't worry about keeping two steps ahead or two steps behind. Going is pleasant one way or another—"

Janina looked at her a long while in silence. She said: "I envy you, Chickie. I always have—"

They got up, then. It was well they did, for Chickie's eyes filled. She felt that in another moment she would seize Janina's hands; she would say in a nervous frenzy—"Don't! Ho—envy me—You should know—"

And she was more excited that afternoon than she had been before—more distracted. She said to herself: "Forty fathoms deep—ho!" And then—"I don't know where he is. He'll wire. He'll surely tell me that—"

She looked over to Janina and wondered with a bleak, withering chill—"You envy me—proud and pure—oh, my, yes! But I haven't the callus—that's all. I'm not like you, Janina. I can't look back and shrug—"

She decided to call up his office again; inquire if his address had come—

But one noontime she bumped into Tufts on the street. She was unnerved and said sharply: "Oh—Mr. Tufts!"

He laughed: "Why, yes, Miss Bryce. What do you hear from Barry?"

"Well—he's fine—enjoying himself."

"Too bad he cleared out like that—think he gave up a good chance here though it was slow, of course."

"His mother was ill—"

"Yes—I know—he's gone to New York, hasn't he?"

"Why, yes—"

"Well—brilliant fellow—but too impulsive. Warn him against that, Miss Bryce—"

She laughed—"I will!"

So Tufts didn't know where he was to go—Tufts couldn't help her!

Five days after their last meeting a letter came. It was from him. At first she didn't realize its import. Gradually the completeness of its admission swung against her—like a heavy door slamming in her face.

CHAPTER LXXX

WHAT IS PAST

CHICKIE tore the envelope with jagged swiftness, and stood for a hot, storming moment with the folded paper shaking in her hand. Here was her sentence. She dreaded it.

It was clearly given.

"There are some things I want to say again, Chickie, before the past that was ours together slips completely from us. I want to say that I loved you and that your love was very dear to me. It will always be. No matter how our lives run from now on I can think of you only as something sweet and beautiful like a dream that has passed.

"I would have held this dream always. I would have kept the love we knew—kept it as it was in the beginning. I wanted it. I suffered torment when I saw it fading. I tried to hold it. And you tried. We failed.

"But is this any reason we should look back now with anger and renounce the feelings that were stronger than ourselves? They were a part of life; they were inevitable. Because of this it seems to me they were right. I think in your heart you, too, admit this. Loving as you did, you must acknowledge it . . . must believe we had a right to this year—every right on the earth. We couldn't deny it.

"Now because it is over and leaves us with a sense of loss, we can easily regret; easily blame each other. We can look back over two roads and having taken one, wish that we had taken the other. Why should we?

"The emotions we shared were an enrichment and not a cheating of life. They seem right and fine to me and all my thoughts of you are filled with tenderness.

"Why don't you think the same of me, Chickie? You know I didn't hurt you and this year hasn't hurt you. You say you gave me all you had, and you say this as though I took your happiness and gave nothing. This isn't true. You know as well as I that to go on would be the real tragedy—go on when both of us have changed, you as much as I.

"Is it fair, Chickie, that you blame me; that you make me out the one who robbed? You cared for me. You felt as I did. If you gave, I returned. All you gave I treasured. The love we knew was beautiful. Why should its passing make it unholy or a thing to bring us shame?"

"It shouldn't, Chickie. We can't let it. This is to dishonor ourselves and the hundred memories of that past.

"These memories of you, Chickie, are all sweet to me. No matter what other experience may come to either it will not alter this for me. Chickie, dear, won't you think of me in this way—please?"

He offered her this—this calm, final as the moveless smile on the face of the dead.

He spoke of their love, all quiet like this. And of her as something sweet and beautiful but a dream that has passed.

And she folded the letter—folded her hands over it—sat without a murmur in the low chair at her window.

Tears that were warm went up softly to her throat. She smiled, raised her chin up—sent them back. She thought, still smiling: "No use to cry. I won't cry—"

She felt that her heart opened and its life drained from her. Soon it would be still. She would sit, unprotesting—wait for this—sink—oh, gladly—in the kind, enveloping silence.

If this could be—if life were tender—so—

In the kitchen Jennie sang with a quavering pathos "I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls—" The song broke off. Now Jonathan moved heavily about the dining room, placing the chairs.

She would have to go out to them in a few moments; have to laugh. Jonathan would say: "Chickie girl, lonesome?" Or he might be in a curious mood and ask questions: "Would the lad be gone long?" "Did he lose much by his absence?"

Well—turn her head away from Jonathan's eyes, make fun of him, fight against that love of his that might bear her down; make her throw herself in his arms; make her say: "Oh, Jonathan—see—see what has come—"

There was Jennie calling her. She knelt down before the bureau. She took the letter and hid it in the bridal set so fragrant with sachet; so gay with all those tiny French flowers, the ribbons. She touched the soft fabric, closing her eyes.

They were waiting for her—those two. If she could walk

in between them, busy herself in their arms—be closed away from these things they did not know—be shut out from herself—

Something like that she must do. The past was gone. She would have to go back—take up a new life; begin all over.

How?

She helped Jennie with the dishes. Jennie took up her song again. She did this—sometimes dwelling on the same strain at intervals during a whole day. Now she shook scouring powder on the drainboard and scrubbed to the tune; her voice pausing on a high note with a pathos that would have made the happier Chickie roar with laughter but that now made her tremble.

Nights and nights like this—her whole life stretching out in a piercing melancholy. And she would be old like Jennie. But she would not sing so—would not be going back to the yesterday, tears in her old voice, as Jennie did.

She hung up the dish towel with an abrupt: "Jennie, darling, see you anon. I've business with Mary."

She walked up the hill, and at Twenty-first Street paused, looking out to the Potrero. Suddenly she remembered the night of her first dance—standing here in a dream, raising her face to Arthur's knowing that it was near to his, seeing his eyes, beautiful as he said, "Chickie, you're so sweet," and the kiss that fell like petals, staining red and sweet about her mouth.

Now the tears rushed to her eyes. She hurried on. Don't think—never think—dream that is beautiful—dream that is passed.

But now as she walked he came beside her, reached her hand, grinned down at her with a merry "Sad, frail? Why, for—" Run from these images—let them all be blotted out. She was alone.

But it was hard to let finality build this wall of cement between her and the thousand living memories that drew her—lured her with their cruel ties. Each time she said to herself, "Ended. It doesn't matter. Don't look back," she found them pulling. Oh, she would get away from this empty dreariness—get back—

In these days she read his letter often, because it brought the stillness to her heart; because it made her see that smile, moveless on the face of one dead.

One night after she read it she went into Jennie: "Mother, darling—let you and I go out for a walk."

Jennie put down her mending: "To a movie, dear? Now I was just wishing—why, yes—"

"Well, all right, then—a movie—"

Jennie was all excited. Chickie helped her dress. She thought: "We'll do this often—yes—years and years." And sometimes it seemed that her life was more completely finished than her mother's.

Another evening as she came from work she met young Tommy Blake—husky little fellow now, about twelve. He had a baseball cap and swung a bat.

Chickie said: "Tommy—like animals? Like little pets?"

He whistled—a brisk alertness in his pug nose: "Wildie—say—want me take him out?"

"Not Wildie—but water dogs—like to have some?"

Tommy cogitated: "Well—humph. Can they do tricks? White mice can—got some you don't want? I might see them—"

She was unable to explain the sudden impulse that moved her—the suspense while Tommy stared at the tall glass aquarium. Then he asked patronizingly, but with his eyes eager: "Gimme the case, too?"

"The whole thing—"

"Honest, Chickie? Not fooling now—? Criminee!" Tommy lifted it with a wink that was like Jimmy's: "Gee, Chickie, ain't you a peach!"

Tommy walked gingerly down the block, carrying the great cylinder. Chickie watched behind the curtain. She felt it was her heart torn out that Tommy carried.

Past now—all past. Take up new threads—begin again—bind herself to Jennie; to Jonathan.

She would make his face grow dim—banish it from her thoughts.

Face white with intensity of feeling as that Sunday when he rode behind her on the bridle path and the pond lilies gleamed like wondrous pearls in the lake. He caught up suddenly, the flanks of their horses touching. He dropped the sprig of yellow broom, took the reins from her, forcing her glance to his. The flush that tinged his forehead; the breathless "Quick, Chickie!" And she stood a little in the stirrups,

waiting till he kissed her twice. He murmured with pain: "Ah, Chickie—I wish it was to-day!"

That—a hundred others—she laid quietly away. Hers no longer. Past they knew together slipping completely from them—

The past does not end. It only merges with the present—only glides with silent step from yesterday into to-day and then to-morrow—

And it bore in upon Chickie with a deadly terror that this was so—and the past is never past. And she was linked to it and to him. Irrevocably.

CHAPTER LXXXI

THE SECRET FEAR

It went piercing through her brain—a long, bright needle of terror. Its sharp point transfixed her thought, holding it aghast, moist with apprehension.

And, standing before her bureau, this sunny morning in the end of May, quietly adjusting her hat, Chickie's hands dropped limp to her sides. She sat down suddenly, shaking—her face bloodless.

Life, cornering her now; life that had allowed Janina, Amy Heaton, a hundred others, to play fast and loose, was now rushing up and overtaking her; shoving this last, incredible consequence upon her.

Now? And she alone, with no way at all to meet it. He gone—he, believing that the past they knew together was all quiet and ended. Ended like a beautiful, sweet dream.

But not ended for her. Following her—overtaking her as it might a woman of Jennie's old-fashioned day.

This couldn't be. Couldn't. Not for her. She wasn't stupid. She wasn't seventeen, like Marjorie Abbot.

Suddenly she remembered what Janina said of Marjorie: "Lucky for her she has money—so they get married. But if a thing like that happened to you or me or Peggy, the cobbler's daughter, we could sink to the seaweed forty fathoms deep! Fat chance to catch up with a husband!"

Happening to her—to this Chickie that Jonathan loved so—that he thought sweet and innocent as an angel? No! It couldn't; it couldn't!

The abrupt, violent heat sweeping up about her neck made her faint—like a poison or a deadly sickness.

She took long, harsh breaths, drawing them with effort. After a moment, wetting her lips, she said to herself, dimly: "I'm crazy! I'm going out of my mind. This is insanity!"

And she went back over the days to that fateful one last August. She remembered how doggedly this fear obsessed her in the beginning. Gradually it had passed. Until finally

she did not think of it at all. She walked the free road as she did; as men do, forgetting that if toll there were to pay, she must be the one to yield it. She lost the fear of consequences.

And now she put it from her as one who imagines a horror, but knows the horror cannot be. She said to herself: "Don't go wild. Have sense. It's not this—it's not—" Yet she went to work, trembling, weak.

During the day, as she typed, the memory of this fear that had come upon her with such panic returned. Now it was no longer the sharp needle in her brain. It was a heavy hand that had got hold of her heart, pressing it—turning it slowly. She was at sudden moments aware of its weight—its suffocating, unbearable pressure.

Especially when she tried to keep her mind away from it—keep her mind a blank. Or if she laughed. Then the hand squeezed leadenly—made her remember.

The day with its hurry of work over. Getting ready to leave, she was suddenly hot with restlessness. Do something—have sense—get back her poise.

She slipped her arm in Janina's. "Come on, ole thing—do a little shopping with me."

Janina, always facile, answered: "I will if you'll eat downtown and come for a swim. I need exercise. Will you?"

"Yes!"

No matter what Janina asked, Chickie would have assented. She wanted company. Wanted to hide from herself; talk incessantly, at lightning speed. That would hush her mind—that would flout the hand on her heart.

And when she plunged into the tank and felt the slim, ready movement of her body through the cool waters, she put her head under, inwardly laughing. The idea! What a fool she was! Beside herself with terrors. And all because he had written that letter and let her know so starkly that his love was dead.

Why, because of that she began to imagine things! But now—well, she wouldn't. Joy still in the world—fun to be splashing about here with Janina, shouting—getting the water in her ears—in the gold hair—making it all curls about her face.

Afterwards they called to each other from the showers; they got weighed; they went into the gymnasium and danced with two other girls who happened to be there.

But when they took a table in the cafeteria and Janina opened

the evening paper, ignoring her—these fears rushed back. Chickie said, in a voice of excitement: "Hear anything more about Marjorie?"

"Give the girl a chance, ole thing!"

"I suppose she'll stay in Santa Clara?"

"Any old time, my dear? They're off to New York on their honeymoon, and they won't come back till the conventional period elapses. And who knows whether a baby is six months of age or ten? Often meet up with precocious infants—especially first ones!"

Janina, folding the paper, must have seen the blanched, driven look in Chickie's face. She smiled: "Shocked? Thought that was rather a pleasing *bon mot*! 'Scuse, baby. I'm crude but not unkind as you've learned!"

"No—but I was just thinking, Janina—a thing like that could happen to any one, no matter how free or bold or clever they are."

Janina shrugged.

"You don't think so? Quite certain it couldn't happen to you?"

A pitying smile: "Yes—innocence—quite coldly certain! Nothing can happen to me that I can't meet, my dear!"

"But suppose it did—I wonder what you'd do?"

"I can never prove that to your satisfaction, because it's not going to happen. But at that, I could brazen it out! I could be the woman who dared! You can get away with murder if you think you can!"

Chickie laughed: "Yes—you can get away with murder in theory. But if you've got the blood of murder on your hands, you're not so cool, I imagine. And then you can't get away with it!"

"Well, I know a girl who did. She just said to people: 'I wanted this. I'm going to have it! What about it?' And she stayed right here in the city and she has a son five years old and supports him and doesn't give a hang who knows it. Her friends stuck with her. But of course, that's rather bizarre and startling. At first they all held off, but when they saw her getting away with it—they shrugged and came back. If all women had courage like that and wouldn't allow themselves to be hounded off the earth, we'd have a better world and we'd soon have a single standard. But, of course, it would be rather hard on the pioneers—"

"Would you like to be one of them, Janina?"

"If it came to a showdown and I had to take my choice between persecution and defiance, I'd take the latter."

Chickie was now breathing noisily—her cheeks blazing. She said in a faint tone: "It would be a rather hard choice, wouldn't it?"

Riding home in the street car, she stood on the platform, putting her head over the steel gate, letting the cool breeze blow down her throat. She kept saying to herself: "Stop now—you'll only make a fool of yourself. It's not this—oh, have sense!"

She woke up in the middle of the night, her whole body clammy—the hand pressing now with a ton's heaviness.

This weight grew. Every now and then it would seem to drop—she would pause breathless, an inner voice whispering: "It is! Oh, God!"

She couldn't bear to look at Jonathan or at Jennie. One evening Jonathan said: "When is Barry returning?"

For a moment the pulses froze. Then she heard herself answering: "I don't know!"

And she saw the astonishment in her father's eyes. She answered hastily: "He won't come till his mother is better. And then he may open his office in New York."

Jonathan stared at her, his face turning gray. Afterwards he followed her to her room, closing the door in his mysterious way, saying in a voice that sagged: "Chickie—Chickie—you mean you may leave us—"

She bent over an open drawer, began sorting its contents. Finally she could laugh—she ran over and buried her head against his shoulder: "Old cutie love—no—Old Jonathan—want me here? Cutie wants his little lamb?"

"Chickie—you won't go? Promise me that?"

"I may—and then I may not! I might ask you to promise something, Jonathan, darling."

"What do you want, Chickie?"

His seriousness affrighted her. She answered in a high, false note: "Oh, I might ask, would you want me though I should get all pock-marked with warts on the end of my nose? If I promise to stay—will you promise to want me for better or worse—for the worst worst?"

And suddenly tears flew into her eyes and were wet on her father's rough cheek. He took his great palm and wiped

her face, laughing at her, saying with a hard anxiety: "Then you don't mean to go, Chickie? Not thinking of that?"

"You haven't made the promise! Why, you haven't said for better or for worse—ever so worse—" She ran from him into the kitchen, calling to the dog; and calling back to Jonathan: "All right! All right!"

She put the collar on Wildie. She pressed her lips against the brown, sleek head, whispering: "I'll love you, dog—you, anyway—no matter how worse—"

CHAPTER LXXXII

THE SUMMONS

THE fear sat on her breast—sat like an incubus, awful in its imperturbable heaviness. She tried to fling it from her. Then it would seem to grow larger, take her breath, exhaling terror through her veins.

She was helpless before these alarms that went shaking and cold into her mind and made of her heart a frantic thing that hid and whimpered.

She beat them down, fighting in panic. She stood before her mirror, staring at herself. And, seeing her face, pretty as a flower; eyes so gray and beautiful, she smiled. She looked the very same—wistful and slender. But she wouldn't—surely—not if this monstrous thing were true.

And, in the office, she joined Stella Wilson and Janina, clinging to them, laughing the merriest; talking with the old gay flippancy a hundredfold increased, until Janina said: "Congratulations, ole kid! Real sand, haven't you? Didn't think it was in you!"

That made her feel light as foam; made her glad. She was just the same; she was like any one else. They could see that. And why not? Why should this thing of agony and shame be hers?

It wouldn't! Wait—and soon she would laugh at the wildness that drove her so—that made her desolate as a fugitive flying from his own thought; driven as an animal is not, from his fellows; even from himself.

Wait—and soon in her relief she would be the blithest thing that ever the green earth knew. Oh, she would forget that she had mourned. In her gratitude she would bless the air and little flowers and the dear, appealing stars that twinkled so—bless them with a gayety that would never die; that would make her brave to endure—oh, anything—if only this might pass, might leave her free!

So she pushed it down and kept it from her thought with an insistent "Of course not! How could it be? Oh, it's not!"

At her desk, typing at lightning speed, concentrating with new intensity on her work, she gained peace. She was able to think calmly, ridicule this obsession of hers; even to say: "The idea! Of all the idiotic things to pick on, why this? And now?"

But alone—away from the comfort of Janina and Stella's chatter; with no wall between herself and her fear, it reached up and shook her mind. It did this at odd moments—as she dried the dishes in the evening. She would stand rigid, a cup in her hands. Coming out of this terror, she glanced stealthily at Jennie. Jennie didn't notice.

Or it seized her sometimes as she took a dress from the closet. Suddenly, leaving her weak, leaning against the wall, murmuring in fright. "No! Oh, God—no—"

More terribly than ever after she said good-night to Jennie and Jonathan—then, just as she closed the door of her room—then it sprang; then the walls were alive, whispering in the pulsing quiet, "It is! It is!"

She turned to this side and that; she covered her face, and sometimes she sank on her knees at her bed, twisting the blankets in her hands, mad pitiful prayers at her lips: "God—don't let this happen—oh, please—anything but this—you won't—"

She rose quieted. To-morrow she would forget—be glad again.

Each night it was another to-morrow; each morning, take up the lockstep with Fear. Until sometimes she fancied a visible presence dogged her—a relentless, forbidding shadow; and others would see her turn suddenly pale as it touched her; they would see her stop short, catching her breath.

So she became unnaturally alert, watching herself. So she became unnaturally winsome. Oh—she couldn't do enough for Jennie. Let her bring in the dinner. Sit still, Jennie darling—let her bring the tea. . . .

Jennie blossomed under all this attention; Jennie grew young. They went out in the evening together—strolled down Mission Street; shopped. Once Jennie said: "Jonathan, you won't be lonesome! Chickie and I are going to make new curtains for the living room."

Jonathan answered: "Take your time, girls! Don't flirt with the lads! That's all."

A thing like that made Jennie blush—made her old heart

glow—silly fellow, that Jonathan! She linked her arm in Chickie's—went spryly down the block.

She was proud of this tall, radiant thing—this child of hers; never done with the wonder of it; the thrill of being Chickie's mother.

In the store where they bought the scrim Jennie met an old friend. The old friend said: "Why, is this Chickie?" Her eyes, surveying the delicate figure, all but said: "I can't believe it! Dumpy little Jennie Bryce with a daughter like this!"

Chickie saw the moist, shiny joy in her mother's eyes; saw her head give that little happy lift. She turned abruptly—bent down over the scrim, whispering to herself: "Oh, mother! Oh, God!"

And the days passed. And the weeks—

One night she took Wildie. She said to those two, sitting in the living room: "I'll stroll down to Mary's—I won't be home till late, perhaps."

She went up the hill to Twenty-first, left the cloistral quiet of Fair Oaks—hurrying. The dog ran with her, straining at the leash. Then she began talking to herself—frantically—"Oh—I know—I know—it is—Oh, God—"

And ran quicker—let Wildie pull her. And kept that up, block after block till her steps failed and the dog came up to her, licking her hand.

There was a hill there—not so far from Twin Peaks. She sat down. Wildie crouched by her side, raising himself now and then, licking her face, tasting her tears, pressing his head in devotion against her knees.

She wound her arms about his neck, saying faintly: "What shall I do—oh, Lord—" She looked up and could see the lights, yellow and blurred, of the automobiles.

There on that ledge, many a time they had parked, looking down over the dark, quiet city. Many a time he had taken her hand, murmuring gayly: "Look up, frail—ah, catch it as it falls! Here—let me see her pretty eyes—"

She could remember this—And now. Remember this Barry she had so loved. That when he said to her: "Oh, it is right—right as the sun—as the river flowing down here to meet the sea. It is for me!" That when he said that—she was convinced and yielded him her heart.

But he didn't want it any longer. It grew a burden to him. She didn't want it either. Throw it away!

But where—

And she fancied that she would walk again. This time to the bay. She would wade in out there near the Union Iron Works. Go at night and the tide would carry her far away—perhaps—

She began to cry, resting her head against the dog. He whimpered. That made it harder—made her heart swell and turn. She knew now. It was true—It must be—weeks and weeks. . . .

Then she thought of Jennie. And Jonathan. Then of Mary. Then Jimmy. Oh—all of them. They would look at her and turn away—too grieved—too shamed to see her eyes.

No, they wouldn't! Oh, no! She'd not bear that! Never—

If only the earth might part and cover her—if only she might drift into death—cease—get away from herself. . . .

Her thoughts went back to him—to that letter he had written. Suppose he knew? Suppose he could see her sitting on this hill, crying like that—talking to a dog—because there was no other one to tell it to—

She fancied his face blanching; fancied his lips shaking. And he would come over and take her hands, lift her up. He would say: "I never dreamed, Chickie—never dreamed of this." He would let her cling to him—

Oh—would he—?

But she didn't want to—no—not now. Not with the love gone from his thought—

She sat there hours until the cold bit into her skin—until her brain numbed. But she said to herself: "Oh, no! He can go—not him—I won't—"

The next morning—many mornings—she awakened with that deadly weight crushing her.

One day, finally she decided. There was nothing else she could do. No other way to meet it. She would have to tell him—have to take his hand and let him lift her up.

She sent a telegram—sent it in care of the Gulf Steamship Company. He would visit Moore—might seek a place from him. Her message would reach him.

She said:

"Barry—come back, will you? You must. A terrible thing has happened."

She waited.

CHAPTER LXXXIII

THE LONG WAIT

CHICKIE left the telegraph office quickly, unnerved because the operator glanced at her; because he read her message slowly—nodding.

For the first time she had admitted the reality of her fear, and this brought it upon her stark, intensified, alive; brought it with a fresh, brutal shock as it might have come to Jennie or to Mary.

She had that hunted feeling; that wish to lower her head, covering it blindly—running. She let herself be carried along with the throngs of commuters rushing to the ferry; let herself get pushed and shoved. In this breathless movement escaping for a moment from her thought.

As she was about to enter the gate she saw just ahead of her Selma Norris, a talkative, inquisitive girl working in an office across the hall. Chickie sped back through the crowds—out into the street again. She reached Sansome and turned her steps northward, avoiding the noisy, babbling streams of humanity pouring from the buildings on either side of the street.

Soon she reached a deserted block; soon she stood at the foot of steps that went up and up, and at the summit of the sheer bluff rising precipitous 300 feet above the bay were trees—tall, slender trees. She remembered them.

They were the trees on the top of Telegraph Hill. They were the trees she had watched, swaying in a wind that night they had quarreled—that night she had stolen down to his office and loitered in the corridor.

And not far from them was that shelf poised midway between earth and sky. Here they had parked the car. Here, suddenly, feeling that his love was dead, there had come upon her that wild impulse to jump from the car, plunge herself over the bluff.

She had said to him then—"Ho—you can't stop me! Hold me here! When you're gone I can come back alone—"

How frightful had been that desolation. And now—how

trifling compared to this. Oh—if she could go back; if she could take a thousand times that hurt and be saved from this— And she wished abruptly to stand on that bluff—to look over it. She went up the steps.

An uncertain, rocky path wound up the steep, harsh incline. It was nearing six o'clock, but sun flooded the slopes and on this lea of the hill was no breeze but a golden calm. A goat with empty, yellow eyes stared like a carven thing, suddenly bounding into life as a troupe of youngsters, black eyed, red lipped, dirty, came flying up the path. One of them with a face from an old Italian masterpiece stopped Chickie with an ingratiating "Penny? Gimme penny?"

When she opened her purse, the whole flock of them surrounded her, their dark eyes filled with eagerness. She was glad for them and asked their names. She had the forlorn feeling that soon even children would ignore her.

Now she went along the narrow ledge and the quarry dropped off straight, frightening. She stared downward calmly and then she shuddered. Horrible that—plunging down. She turned from it—a breathless heat rushing into her face.

She hurried upward to the summit, sank down under the tree.

And she thought of the message she had sent. It seized her anew with panic. Admitting it! Believing it! Flinging it broadcast—calling him back!

Why—why had she? Perhaps—oh, perhaps—Her thoughts brought a faintness through her. She bit her lips, afraid of the heavy, knocking thing that was now her heart.

He would read that message. She could see his fine, vital hands holding the yellow slip, tremble—see his eyes sicken.

But he would come to her. She knew this. He would take her hands quietly and more tragic than their parting would be the sorrow of their meeting. There would be always that stillness in his face—for the dream and the beauty were passed.

She thought of this with anguish—thought of it and tears that she could not stop poured into her eyes; made her throat ache. Oh—hard to have him back like this; hard to meet forever, a gentle coldness in his look.

And suddenly she said: "I won't! No—" Her impulse was wild again—her impulse hurled her to that cliff. She said to herself quietly: "It would be better—much better—"

For a long while after this she remained mute, her eyes

following a pearly cloud that drifted to and fro like a sea shell on the water.

And then he stood before her again but not gentle now—not with white, stricken face. His eyes were hot, demanding: "What do you mean by this? Listens good! How dare you send that message through Moore?"

She pressed her hands against the earth, trembling—shutting the image from her. No—he would never speak like that—no—

And he wouldn't want her hurt. He would never send her away to bear it alone—

But this fear took root now in her mind and flowered cruelly. It nourished on her own distraction.

Of course! Listens good! Why should it happen now? How could it? And he might think it all a trick—think it just a ruse to win him back. She had read of things like this.

That night she dreamed of this. The next day, when no answer came, alarm seized her.

It happened that just then the newspapers were filled with an ugly murder—a young girl's body found in a cellar. She had been killed, perhaps in accident, but to cover up some other frenzied crime.

Now that she was dead—and had let herself be murdered—for it amounted to this—that she might escape shame; now all her love was told and every little detail and all the agony laid bare. Chickie read the columns in a still terror.

She said to Janina at lunch: "Isn't that ghastly?"

Janina shrugged, "Just as I told you. Innocence—women let themselves be done to death. They let the world hound them like beasts. If they had the courage, they could get away with it! But now all your dear, good people will clamor that the murderer be found. They are the murderers—filled the poor, lone devil with such insane misery she'd risk death rather than brook their opinions. Well, as our good friend, the Mysterious Stranger, points out, it takes the race with the highly developed 'moral sense' to create hells for one another."

"Yes—but listen, Janina, would you think a man who ever loved a girl would desert her in a time like that?"

"The desertion, my dear, usually takes place before the murder."

"But those letters she wrote to him. If he ever cared for her, he would come back—"

"Suffering Satan! If you hand me a line like this, Chickie, have the ice water handy. He did the handsome thing—he sent her money. That's a man's code. He will take her hand gently and lead her down. If she's so stupid that she hits a level where she can't get back—he sends her a check. That is—if he's one of the princely sort. No man takes a round trip ticket with a girl when they start on this cruise. If she comes back—mind you—she comes back alone. Or she stays down."

Chickie was now rigid with a white hot excitement. She said swiftly: "There have been cases—I've often heard of them—"

"Yes—perhaps— If she has a father with a gun in his mit; or a wild-eyed brother, or if she is the common sort and brings an arrest—"

"But it's a man's concern as well as the girl's, isn't it?"

"Seeing that he can escape consequences by the simple expediency of flight and she can escape only through the tragedy of death, I'd say it was the girl's concern—"

She went back to work feeling that every impulse was a separate anguish. They shook and moaned. She was afraid of her own breath.

Now from dreading this meeting with him, she was driven with a madness lest it might never be.

She went to the telegraph office—but a different station this time and sent a second wire: "Barry—please answer. Let me know at once. Are you coming?"

The next day and the next, but still no word—still his silence.

CHAPTER LXXXIV

THE COMPLICATION

SATURDAY afternoon Chickie remained to finish a letter; remained to avoid Janina and Stella. She looked across the alley—long and unblinking. The sun was in her hair and on her face—lily face; a brooding quiet in her mind. She wondered where he was; if he'd suffer, learning this.

Suddenly her nerves shrilled. Learning this of her! She pressed her face against the window, mute, trembling. She waited while the faint heat swept about her; waited as the terror leaped and sank again—leaving that shaken chill in every pulse.

Leaving that weakness; that lashing fright so that she had an idea of grabbing up her hat—running and running. She didn't know where. But away—into some far, hidden spot. And no one would hear of her again; no one would ever learn of this—oh, be sure of that!

Driven like this, she hurried down Montgomery Street. In a moment she bumped headlong against another that towered; that laughed exultantly: "Just as I want it to be! Toppling into my arms. Helena, my dear—after many years! But I've waited, you see!"

It was Jake. She was unable to speak; unable to meet the warm, friendly eyes.

But Jake clasped her hand; its magnetism heartened her—strong thing it was to hold. Seeing her confused, almost bewildered, he said, teasing: "Nice day, Miss Bryce? Real pleasant weather we're having? Well, Helena dear, up now and speak!"

In a nervous excitement: "Well—Mr. Jake—an' where do you hail from, if I may make so bold as to arsk? And where are you going?"

"With you, my dear, and I may make so bold as to assert it!"

He took her arm in his cozy, intimate way as though they were in the habit of meeting so. He said: "I've been away,

Chickie, and also I've been watching my time and waiting. It seems to have come! Since such is such, how about a nice, tasty bite to eat?"

"I've had lunch, thank you!"

"You little liar! You haven't touched a morsel since the last time I fed you. Step lively—the chariot waits!"

"I can't, Jake—no, really—" And because of the sick, tightening thing that drew at her throat, she swayed a little.

Jake glanced at her with kind, shrewd eyes. "I won't keep you long, Helena. But let us two have a cup of tea like nice, chummy old maids together. That won't compromise you in the eyes of God, or man, will it?"

She let him help her to his car; let him press her hands as he said in the rich, familiar tone: "Dear Lady Indifference, the old dog is back. Will you throw him a bone or two? He deserves it—patient fellow—"

She could feel red patches glowing on her cheeks—a red burn searing on her heart. But she answered at an attempt at flippancy: "Well, now, I don't know about that, Mr. Jake! The old dog has no lean or hungry look. I take it he's been well nourished!"

The little glints darted in his eyes and over the red, flashing mouth. "There's much that feeds the flesh, my dear, and leaves the spirit starved. Know you that?"

"So it's food for your soul you crave?" She laughed. "But where does one buy that, Jake, I wonder?"

"That's what one doesn't buy, Helena. That's what is given—only given—"

She asked, trembling, but still with the laugh: "And does it feed the one who gives or the one who takes?"

"Both—both, Helena—"

"That must be wonderful food, Jake. Have you ever tasted it?"

He surveyed her with a touch of sadness, tossed his head. "Some day I'll answer you, my dear—"

It surprised her that even now, entering the restaurant with him, noting the fine, kingly air, the set of his black, proud head, she could feel a glow of pride. And she shuddered, noting this.

He pushed the frail vase of flowers aside, leaning forward on his folded arms. And he began to talk vividly—a rich, easy flow of spirits. He'd been east, south. He'd taken the

yacht to Honolulu—great trip—she should have been along. Other trips, though, all summer. How about to-morrow? No? Next week-end, then. How about her vacation? Well—bring Jennie along!

And he roared at that. Chickie stammered. Finally her excuses gave out. She stared at him, white-faced, imploring: "Thanks, Jake—no—I can't. Really—"

"Not even to a show, Helena? Not even to a dinner—say next Wednesday?"

He saw her hands clasped before her tremble—saw the lowered eyes close sharply. He leaned down and whispered: "Chickie, you take things too much to heart. You mustn't. It's a sweet world if you'll just open your eyes wide and see it so. I'm telling you, my dear! I've given you time and plenty. Now see here—let an old dog come wagging along for comfort, won't you?"

She smiled, but didn't raise her eyes. And the pale, chiseled sweetness that was in her mouth and soft, childlike throat moved him as it always had. "You will, won't you, my dear?"

She said uneasily: "Do I need comfort, Jake? You think I'm the damsel in distress, I take it?"

"No, my dear! You think that. I think you're the damsel—well, you'll be angry if I say it, Helena. Yet it's true. I think you're the damsel in luck."

She reached for her gloves, feeling that in another moment her poise would be completely gone—feeling all through her a sobbing faintness. She twisted her lips to smile: "For which kind words, I thank you and depart, Mr. Jake!"

"No—you're not offended, Chickie? Why, my dear—"

She interrupted hastily: "Not offended, Jake—only in a hurry—"

"You don't mean to turn me down cold, like this, Chickie? Why, I've a day all planned. Nice little ride down the country; nice little dinner—"

"You're good to me—" But she was standing. He took her arm and followed.

He said hastily: "I wouldn't have said that, Chickie, but I didn't think you were feeling quite that somberly. See here—well, I'm going to drive you home, anyway. Get in." His red, smiling mouth was pale. He looked at her intently: "Chickie, my dear, I ask you to forgive that—please—"

Now she was able to answer lightly: "What? Forgive you

for thinking me lucky? Oh, I don't mind that at all, Jake. Honestly!"

"Only you don't agree? Is that it, Chickie?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, Helena, then, perhaps I'm wrong but I've looked pretty hard at life and I've seen life look hard at others and there are ill lucks and sorrows that you know nothing about. But there are joys that can be yours for the taking—there are the fine, happy things you can grab. So, Helena, dear—that's lucky. Suppose you begin to-day. Let me have my plan?"

"Oh, some other time, Jake. You see, I promised—"

"Now look here, Chickie, you're not going to pull the Jennie gag on me again, are you? You're not going to tell me you promised Jennie you'd help make a cherry pie, are you? I'll ram it down your throat if you do."

"Let me off, then, to-day, Jake—"

"Will you promise me a to-morrow?"

"Maybe—you see." Suddenly she reached over and touched his hand. But her eyes filled.

He said: "All right, my dear—well—"

Jennie was in the garden as they drove to the house and Jonathan was standing at the door. His rugged face was alight with pleasure. He came down with the manner of a lord, extended his hand, the old eyes beaming. He said, grandly: "A pleasure, Mr. Munson—"

And when Jake left, Jonathan put his arm on Chickie's shoulder; he raised her chin in his palms, chuckling. "Fine man, that Mr. Munson! Fine fellow, Chickie girl!"

She went into the garden, helped Jennie train the rose vines. The thorns scratched her hands. Jennie said: "Don't, Chickie, dear. Let me do that. Spoil your pretty hands."

"What do I care!" And it gave her a pleasure to look at the red scratches.

Jennie said, musing: "Your father likes him, Chickie."

"Who, mother?"

Jennie, smiling shyly: "You don't know, I suppose. Jonathan wants him to supper to-morrow. We can have chicken."

Chickie said, dully, a new fear in her heart, "No! No!"

Those that she loved—that would have died to save her pain, began suddenly to make the thing harder—make life unbearable for her.

CHAPTER LXXXV

THE WORD FROM BARRY

THEY had their dreams for her—those two. Life should come gently to this pretty thing of theirs. At nights they talked of it.

Sunday morning after the meeting with Jake, Jennie brought a tray to Chickie's room. She went padding about, raising the shade, letting in bright streams of sun, glancing expectantly to the long, slender form, unstirring under the covers. She had much to say—much that Chickie would do well to hear.

Chickie knew this. She was awake—uneasy.

Jennie took the chair at the bed. Smiling, she regarded the profile etched against the pillow; softly, she touched the beautiful hair, smoothing the strands from Chickie's forehead.

And there was such tenderness in the short, plump fingers. Chickie turned from it. Too much—that. She said, her face half buried in the pillow: "Jennie, ole dear—out with it—what's biting you this early in the morning?"

Jennie stammered: "Why—your breakfast, dear. It's quite late. I thought perhaps you'd be going out to-day." After fussing with the tray, pouring the coffee, she began her artless cross-examination. Nice that Mr. Munson was so attentive. Perhaps they'd all go to the theater again. Well—Chickie had been staying home too much this last month . . . not that Jennie wanted her to gad . . . but, then, youth is so short.

And finally: "You're not sure when Barry will return?"

"He isn't sure himself."

Jennie made tucks in her white apron. "He doesn't send his letters here."

"Too bad, Jennie dear! Want to read them first?"

Jennie blushed. "Does he write every day, Chickie?"

"Over there in the bureau drawer, Jennie—count them—"
Chickie cut the fat carefully from the ham, holding the knife and fork rigid.

Jennie went on in a soft, monotonous tone: "Oh, it's not that I'm curious, Chickie. But you say he may decide to remain in New York and you've promised not to leave us. Then you

should be wise. It's not often a girl meets a man like Mr. Munson. I'm sure any girl would be proud of him. And it's not right for you to take him up and dandle him and drop him as you're doing. That's not right, Chickie. A girl should have dignity and she should be very careful not to trifle with a man's affections."

"Ho, Jennie—don't make me larf! They're all so careful of our affections, aren't they? They've always been, so I hear tell!"

Jennie stood to her guns. "He must think a great deal of you to come back again and again. You ought to look ahead, unless you've promised Barry. Then you should tell us. You should tell your father and me if you're engaged. Chickie—are you very certain Barry is the right man for you?"

Chickie's blood stilled. A frozen thing went slowly like a horror through her veins.

Jennie made the little tucks as she asked this. And Chickie, watching her, wondered suddenly what would happen if she were to face those gentle eyes with the truth. Oh—if she were to tell her mother?

She could see the bland, rosy cheeks grow ashen; see Jennie's mouth sag. She pushed the tray from her, saying quickly: "Here, Jennie! So you and Jonathan want to be rid of me, I take it? Ho—you would peddle me off—"

When Jennie was gone, Chickie lay a long while with her hands pressed over her face. She kept saying: "I'll hear to-morrow; I'll wait this week—just this week—"

Scenes from the meeting with Jake flashed disturbingly through these thoughts. Now for the first time she weighed Jake's looks—Jake's words.

How did he come to take it all for granted? How did he know that Barry was gone and was not coming back to her? Why, he seemed to read her heart!

Suddenly she was frightened. Perhaps Jake had seen him in New York? Or perhaps Tufts told him. Might he even have mentioned that night she had come to the corridor?

No! What did Tufts know? Why, they might have arranged to meet like that—

Oh—Jake only took a chance! Jake knew that he was away and so he came stealing back. Then she had let him know the rest, getting excited like that; rushing him out when they were scarcely finished—

She got up and began to dress—soft, happy morning that it was. Like the hundreds when they had driven down the highway, taking their lunch, dreaming the long sweet hours away!

She thought: "Soon—soon—I can't go on like this—" But she could not force herself to meet the issue. She dallied in a kind of terrible despair with the brighter things that might have been. She said to herself quietly: "Yes—Jake would come back—"

And Jake would phone. He would insist on that to-morrow she had half promised. She fancied herself saying to him: "You don't want to go out with me, Jake. Listen—" Then telling him. Seeing his face darken, seeing him, too, turn from her with a shame.

Seeing herself finally alone—standing in that gray waste, watching the gray sea.

This vision she swept away. There never would be the moment when Jake or her mother would know. Never that!

No use to get wild about it now. Barry hadn't received the message. The moment he did—then he would come. It would be the gladdest thing in the world. But kind—anyway. And he would want that. Oh—they would try to be happy—try to make it sweet again—

Sunday she filled her mind with this vision. Fancied herself saying to him: "Barry—never mind—we can go back—Oh, I can be so strong now—strong for anything—"

It was Tuesday that Bess Abbot came into the office at noon. She came for Janina, but, seeing Chickie, insisted that she, too, have lunch with them.

Chickie always was fascinated with the grace and the duchess languor that the white, fragile Bess carried off so delicately. She admired the endless stream of words that rippled so carelessly from the brightly painted lips.

It began as they sat at the table. In the midst of lunch Bess turned to Chickie: "Well—you nice, fresh violet, I do like your shameless impudence. Now—if it was I that had just tossed a sweet, long love affair into the sea I'd have the decency to mourn a little.

"At least I'd lose my appetite and have to take the rest cure. But will you look at that brazen hussy tucking in the French pastry as though handsome redheads grew in every little garden!"

Janina's eyes narrowed. Her foot moved as though it would nudge Bess, but it was Chickie's toe it touched.

Bess went on: "Well—I suppose you feel cheerful about it seeing that Ila's soft arms were ready, willing and waiting. Ill wind that blows no one any good!"

Chickie managed to say: "How so, Bess? Did I send him to such a doom?"

"I don't see how you can plead 'not guilty.' Maybe it's all for the best! They'll make a good pair. The wonder is that Ila ever let him escape. If her father hadn't packed her off to Europe four years ago they'd have been married then, I suppose."

Now Janina's foot kicked viciously. It struck Chickie's ankle.

But Chickie said: "So my lost love isn't mourning, Bess. Who gave you all the news?"

"Two and two together, my dear! I'm clever at deductions. I take it that she's carrying him off to Italy for sweet designs of her own."

It made no difference now that Janina might know—that Janina might see her heart. Chickie said: "Oh—Yes! So he went with her? They've gone already?"

"Why, the boat left for the sunny south last week—Monday, I believe!"

Monday—two days before Chickie had sent her telegram.

CHAPTER LXXXVI

JANINA'S ADVICE

SHE would have to meet it alone.

Now she hurried along at Janina's side, watching her feet; watching the feet of men, heavy and swift; of girls, light, pointed. She began counting these feet, not daring raise her eyes; not trusting her shaking lips to say a word.

He was gone on the tour—perhaps even now standing on the deck. Ila at his side; Ila's fair hair blowing in his face. He didn't know—now he wouldn't know. The months would pass—

She shivered. Within her was a cold—a violence of cold. She felt like gripping Janina's hands; like shrieking: "God, what am I to do! Janina—what in the name of God can I do?"

Janina spoke abruptly: "Well, too bad, ole kid! Sorry I kind of butted in on the thing. Bess never guessed, though. You didn't know he was going on the tour?"

"No—"

"Didn't he hint about it? Didn't you half guess that was why he beat it off to New York? He knew he could join them there—make a neater break, and a man always takes the easier way."

"Oh, no—that's not why he went—not at all—"

A sharp withering glance. But Janina halted. The dead pallor of Chickie's skin; the hunted look in Chickie's deep, beautiful eyes smote her. "Of all things, baby! You think he went to visit his mother? So considerate-like! And then just sweetly got roped into this? Well, if I were you, Chickie, I'd not be finding excuses—"

"I'm not! Why—well, we just agreed, you know—it was all agreed, in a way—"

"I see! Agreed to part and meet again if all went well on the Potomac—eh?"

Chickie closed her eyes, following Janina blindly—heaving against her.

"Well, it's tough, ol' dear. At least, it seems so to you. But it's not a tragedy. When a man wants to go, let him have the gate; help him along with the boot—the quicker, the better! If it dragged on for years and then ended, you'd have something to cry about."

"I'm not crying, Janina. Only I expected him back—so it was a shock . . ."

Janina's eyes hardened: "Poor kid! I suppose it was. But don't think about him; not worth it. No man is, when he's gone. That's what women must learn. Drop a flower on the grave, not a tear. Be glad for what you had—don't mourn for what you've lost!"

In the devastation of Chickie's mind, Janina's wit was a paltry, twittering thing—a sparrow chirping in the trench where a young world dies . . . She had a sudden impulse to say: "Oh, rave, Janina! What do you know—! I wonder what you'd do? You can meet whatever comes? Oh, you can, can you? I wonder how—"

This frightened "How?" shrilled through her thoughts. It hooted like a wind in her ears. At her desk that afternoon it beat against her. Her hands grew rigid on the typewriter. She whispered back, frantic: "God!" A faintness that was warm and sick went circling round and round about her heart. Noises thudded in her ears.

Finally when Janina went into the office of Harry Lewis, Chickie scribbled a note: "I'm beating it. Tell Lewis anything you like. I need the air, ole thing! See you to-morrow—"

She walked up Kearny Street, stopping at the window of a pawn shop, staring vacantly at ponderous old watch chains; immense jade rings. A stocky, black-haired man with an unctuous face opened the show case, putting a tray of bracelets directly under her gaze. He smiled at her.

She turned sharply, retracing her steps. She wondered bleakly where she was going. At California, she started up the hill to the green park across from the old church. A little Chinese girl in bright blue pantaloons and white, embroidered silk coat chased a ball. Her nurse, with flat, amber face frowning, called in a high, undulating sing song; clapped her smooth, plump hands.

Chickie passed them. She sat on the grassy slope. Quiet here in the tranquil sun; quiet as though from the sanctuary there came sweetly the distilled peace of answered prayer.

Chickie felt it and turned her eyes from the gleaming cross.

No answer for her—none that she could hear. Only terror driving her—only disgrace—only the awful shame of bowing before Jonathan's eyes. Jonathan—why it would kill him—she knew that—proud old giant that he was—

She hadn't dared to think of this. She had hoped. She had sent the telegrams. And he would get them. He would come!

They would be married. Not sweet to think about. She had cried at night, fancying the quiet in his eyes when he stood somewhere before another and gave the promises. Yet she had clung to this hope with the passion of despair.

Now this was gone. He wouldn't come—he couldn't.

It seemed to her that her heart was laid open—and a club beat it. She said to herself, pressing her hands against her throat, trying to rub away the hotness; the aching suffocation—"I have to think—I'll have to decide—"

She didn't though. She wondered in a kind of frenzy how long it would take for him to come from Italy here; if she might get some word to him—could he come in time? Would he?

Rush to her and leave that brilliant throng? Suddenly she saw Ila Moore's white hand on his arm; saw the calm smile on Ila's face.

She got up and walked, twisting her hands. Then she sat down again, idly.

On the bench was a newspaper. She reached for it. She turned to the front page. There was a line across the top. The body of the girl found in the basement was identified. Lily Tassman—a school teacher—young—good family.

Chickie read it—a fever burning in her heart. Some one had seen the girl in Berkeley, wandering about Shattuck Avenue; some one had seen her walking back and forth before a doctor's office. Now, this some one remembered that the girl had a distracted manner.

Poor Lily Tassman—tears came to Chickie's eyes. For herself, though. She saw herself wandering crazily like the murdered girl; saw herself stopping people on the street with her distracted ways.

No—she wouldn't do this. Much better ways. Quietly she marshaled them. She could ride across the bay and walk too near the edge of the lower deck. She could drop

into the water. She could go into the kitchen at night, turn on the gas—oh—and little Jennie stumbling across that shameful thing in the morning.

She was almost fainting. She walked again. Some way—there must be some way to meet this. Janina could do it—Janina shrugged, reading of Lily Tassman. She said: "Why in thunder did the poor fool make such a mess of it? Well—it's just as I say, let the softies and the incompetents stick to the straight and narrow. They can't get away with freedom!"

But Janina could. Janina could help her. If she went and asked—even if she were to tell the whole thing? Now in the near collapse of her endurance she regarded this mutely. Tomorrow Janina would say: "Buck up, ole kid—don't let a little chip bust up the whole works!"

This or something like it would give the opening. Chickie would laugh. She would say bitterly: "Little chip, Janina—the whole works has gone to smash. Listen—"

Janina would save her. She lay awake that night devising the means of telling it.

The next day she tried at noon to speak. Her tongue clove to her mouth. Tell Janina! Why, she was out of her mind, imagining that!

Three days passed. Each noon she made an attempt. And each time failed. But Saturday she found a way. The papers had an extra. A doctor had been arrested, charged with the murder of Lily Tassman. Chickie bought the paper.

She said to Janina: "Look—pictures of her—ghastly, propped up like that—aren't they?"

"What did I tell you—yelling for the murder! They've got him—he'll probably get his, and the next time a thing like this happens they'll get another quack. But they won't do a darn thing to make it decenter for the fool women that get into the mess. They won't shut their hideous tongues and let her get away with it—will they? Hound her to death and then ask, 'Who did this murder?'"

"What else could she do, Janina?"

"Do! Did she need to stall around waiting till the crack of doom before she tries to save herself? If she waited that long she had a right to beat it off to the country or brazen it out—one or the other."

"I suppose she didn't know—"

"Rubbish—a school teacher ought to have some sense. Any-

way, easy enough to find out—every one has some friend or another.”

“Rather ticklish asking a thing like that—”

“Better than being murdered, isn't it? You'd think she wouldn't have wasted a minute—easy enough to get out of a jam—”

“How, Janina? what could she do—”

“Nothing at that stage of the game—why so excited, baby? Look at yourself in the mirror there—white as a ghost—”

Chickie turned to the mirror—shaking— Why did Janina say that? She laughed. She pinched her cheeks. She said: “Well—I think this is awful—just awful—”

The opportunity passed.

CHAPTER LXXXVII

GRASPING AT STRAWS

THE idea of suicide possessed and frightened her.

She read accounts in the newspapers, thinking: "Why don't they do it more cleverly?" Her hidden thought was this: "I'd do it and no one will ever know." Sickening chills ran over her; a mortal shrinking from the stark escape that seemed forcing every day more inevitably.

She had a habit now of closing the door of her room, turning the key softly, standing before her mirror, shaking with excitement. Often she had to grip a chair. She viewed herself from every angle. Then it seemed to her that she must be the victim of an insane alarm.

Tall—pretty face—slender as a reed.

Sitting at the table, she was often unable to eat. She looked at her mother and father, saw them crushed by the grief she was bringing them; saw Jonathan with his head bowed in his hands. She got up with some swift excuse, hurried to her room, hiding in the closet.

But when morning came up fair and beautiful, and Jennie would bring a rose for her to wear, would pin it gayly on the blue suit, her little plump hands trembling, Chickie weakened. To lean against Jennie then—drop in quiet on that ample breast—oh, the peace—the blessed, aching relief!

There were wild moments when she even dreamed of doing this. Put her arms about Jennie, sink against her—tell her—yes, tell her! Was it such an awful crime she had done? And no one would ever wish to look at her again? They would rather have her dead than know of it?

Others didn't need to die. They were hard or clever like Janina, like Amy Heaton, like a dozen she knew. They could escape. She was the one chosen to pay.

Why? And now, when the love was over and he gone? Sometimes it seemed such a ghastly thing—so pitiless—she would cry, even on the street.

If some one might have touched her hand then; if they

might have said: "It's not so terrible. You'll get over it; others have," she would have fallen at their feet in gratitude. She longed with a driving hunger for a brave word like that.

One day she went to Mary.

Little Edward was two now, with black hair like Jimmy's and the merriest eyes. He liked Chickie, and sat now on her lap, opening and shutting her purse, playing with the keys.

Mary said, hiding her eagerness: "Not handsome, is he, Chickie? You know how I always wanted beauty? How I envied you? But personality is better, isn't it, in a man? The baby has that—don't you think so? That is—for a little fellow—"

The baby had succeeded in jangling the keys and piped in a glad, birdlike voice: "See! See! Mamma see!"

Mary's face glowed, but she feared Chickie would tease, and appeared not to notice.

Chickie lowered her head, pretending to laugh against the baby's neck. She could scarcely breathe. There were questions she wished Mary to answer. She had tried several openings. Now she went in baldly.

"He's a love, Mary! A love. And you wouldn't give him up for a hundred lives, would you? Why, you're just blushing, you think he's so wonderful. Remember how we used to pity poor Lucy? Now you think a child is the greatest thing in the world, don't you?"

"We didn't know, Chickie. And four children in five years is no joke. I'll still hold that. Yet if I had to take my choice between four in a hurry or none at all, I'd take the four."

"They're worth as much as that, Mary? Honestly?"

"Yes—they are!"

"Always, Mary? Would you say they're such a blessing as that?"

"Yes, I would. They mean work, but there's no joy in the world equal to them—"

"Equal to having a child, you mean? Ho!" Excitement was now hot like a flame at her throat. She began to laugh: "Ho—I guess so—a blessing always!"

Then with a deadly quiet: "Mary—what would Lily Tassman say to that?"

Mary shuddered: "Chickie! Lord, what makes you say that? Awful—oh, I've just been sick reading of that—"

"Yes—yes—Mary, imagine it! Imagine what she suffered!"

Mary kept repeating: "Yes—awful! I can't understand it. A girl like that might know better. You'd think she could have done better—"

"Maybe she thought that, too, Mary! Maybe she thought she was pretty clever."

"I suppose so. It's too horrible—"

"But it happens! Things like that happen, Mary—they do. You say it's horrible. But imagine how terrible to go and have yourself murdered. Imagine that! And all because she was going to have a child. She didn't dare have a child—didn't dare! Janina says public opinion is the murderer. It is, isn't it? People wouldn't let her have the baby! They say she wandered like a crazy person about the streets. Oh, I think that's the cruelest thing! You have a child and it's the biggest joy in the world; it's a blessing. Hers is a crime! That's the horrible part of it—"

Mary stared in amazement: "For pity sakes, Chickie, what's the matter with you? Where do you get this stuff? Want the world to think like Janina and we'll have children born on every doorstep!"

"Any old time! Oh! Mary—such a thing to say! It's no crime for married people to have children. But they aren't crowding the world out with them, are they? If they have two, why, they have a family! They're doing a great and glorious service to the race—"

Mary grinned. "True enough, true enough! You win! But at that, Chickie, do you think a girl like Lily Tassman, or any one, for that matter, has the right to bring a child here with no care for its future?"

"No. But it shouldn't be thought a crime, should it? She shouldn't be stoned to death, should she?"

"It is a crime, though. A child has certain rights. Life isn't so easy or delightful under the best conditions. We take a mighty responsibility launching any one here—"

"Being married doesn't alter that, Mary—"

"Yes, it does. It gives two to meet the responsibility."

"Oh, Mary—suppose the father died beforehand—suppose that—then there'd only be one to meet it—"

"Well—you don't count on that—a child has a right to a name, anyway, and to two parents—"

"Oh, yes! And it has a right to money and food and education. Lots of them don't get it. And if the father dies, we don't blame the child, do we, and call it frightful names, and say it has no right to live?"

She was straining forward now, pressing little Edward—a fever in her eyes. Mary looked at her intently and the wild blood spattered across Chickie's face.

She tried to speak. Her lips worked. And suddenly she put the baby on the floor. She leaned against the wall and began to cry.

"Chickie! For the love of heaven!" Mary's arms were about her waist. Mary said, fearfully: "Chickie—why, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, Mary! Nothing. A terrible thing. I saw a terrible thing. Kathryn Armour hanging to her bed. Oh—awful. She tried to commit suicide—"

"Kathryn Armour? Who is she?"

"You know—I told you—you know—the new girl. She came to work last month—you know—"

"No—you didn't tell me. Hanging to the bed? You saw her? Dead—why did you see her?"

"No—she's going to live. Oh, I went there. Just came from there this afternoon. We knew. Janina and I knew something was wrong. When she didn't come to work we went to her room. We found her—like that. Oh, I can't get over it. That's what makes me feel so. I didn't mean to tell you."

"Oh—oh, isn't that awful? She's going to have a child, Chickie?"

"Yes, she is. She told me and she told Janina. And then she got to brooding over it and what her mother and father would say. They live in Oakland. And what all her friends would say. So she tried to kill herself.

"And she'll try again. I know she will. But if people didn't look at it so—if they would let her have it and not think it such a crime, wouldn't that be better, Mary?"

Mary kept saying stupidly: "Poor thing! You saw her? Isn't that frightful—frightful. She's going to live—"

"Yes—and she doesn't know what to do or where to turn or what's to become of her afterwards or of the child. And she says the child will blame her and hate her—"

"Yes, it will—of course it will. Poor thing—too bad she

didn't die—too bad. Now she has to go through it all—"

Chickie wiped her face. She stood at the mantel and powdered her nose. She said: "Get me a drink, Mary."

Her cheeks were white. They were very white. She followed Mary into the hall. She said, brokenly: "Yes—she would be better dead!"

CHAPTER LXXXVIII

THE WORLD'S OPINION

CHICKIE recalled with a quiver of alarm the intent amazement in Mary's face. She had almost given herself away, standing there against the wall—crying—making up that wild tale. She was afraid to meet Mary again.

The next afternoon, as she came from work, Tommy Blake stopped her: "Mother wants to see you, Chickie. Right away!"

"Wants to see me? Why?"

"Search me! She told me to wait for you."

Chickie trembled. But she went through the dilapidated garden where she and Mary romped and had tea parties and buried the sparrows that the cat killed. She passed the stunted palm and the old breath of heaven tree, picking a branch of the tiny white flowers.

She did the same thing that long-ago Sunday when she came to ask Martha about the Blessed Damozel and if a kiss was wrong.

It was a little after five. This was Martha Blake's best hour. Her table was laid, her dinner cooking. She used to sit in the roomy, old-fashioned kitchen in a low wicker chair reading until Jimmy came.

Now as Chickie pushed the screen door Martha's rich, mellow face sharpened. She brought out frozen raspberries and slices of a light, creamy cake.

"A long time, Chickie, dear, since you've paid your old friend a visit. I want to know about that young girl. Mary told me this morning."

Chickie's heart stopped. For a palsied moment she could not even remember the name she had given to Mary.

Martha said: "Why, I mean the girl who tried to hang herself."

Chickie closed her eyes: "She's better. A little. You mean Kathryn Armour?"

"Poor child!" Martha shook her head. "I want to go and see her, Chickie—"

"See her? Oh—"

"Yes. I've been thinking all day about her—poor girl. Some one should help her. Will you take me to see her, Chickie?"

"See her! I can't! Oh—she's gone! She went away. She went this morning. She went to the country. Left a note. Oh, I can't take you to see her, Mrs. Blake. I don't know where she's gone. The note just said for us not to bother. She'd get along somehow. So I suppose she will. She doesn't care now what happens. Oh, she's desperate, I suppose. She'll try that again. I think so. I think she means to try it again—"

"We must find her, Chickie. She can come here. She can have Mary's room—"

Chickie pushed the berries from her. Her lips twitched. Tears ran into the corners of her mouth. "I don't think we can, Mrs. Blake. She just didn't tell a soul where she was going. She didn't want us to know."

Martha kept shaking her head, her eyes full of sadness.

"Too bad—too bad—"

"You feel sorry for her? But won't she be better dead? Much better?"

"Why do you say that, Chickie? No one is ever better dead—"

"Mary thought so! Mary said it was a terrible crime to bring a child here without a father—"

"It is a terrible thing—"

"Well—" Chickie doubled her hands, driving the nails into her flesh. "Well—Kathryn was sweet. Oh—she would be good to it. She would love it. Why is it such a crime, Mrs. Blake, because Kathryn was to have a child and it's so wonderful that Mary has one? That's what made Kathryn bitter. She loved the man; loved him terribly. She thought they had the right. I don't know—of course. But it seems queer that a thing can be so holy and beautiful after a few words are said and so shameful and hideous without those words—"

"Ah, no, Chickie! That's not it at all. Marriage isn't instituted to make an immoral thing moral as some people seem to think. It is instituted to safeguard the race—the child. We must do this. It isn't a question of right and wrong at all. There is no evil and no shame in a fine human emotion. Marriage doesn't alter this. It is merely a question of experience. And marriage is the device that helps us to meet honorably the consequences of our deeds."

"If that were true, Mrs. Blake, I should think there could be another device—a better one and when a girl like Kathryn was to have a child, it wouldn't be thought a crime and she wouldn't be frightened off the earth. They'd let her have the child. But even you say it is an awful thing—just awful—"

"Yes, Chickie—it is awful to bring a little helpless thing here when we know the struggle before it is so cruel; it is awful to bring a child here that the world will not receive . . ."

"That's the world's sin, I should think—not the girl's—"

Martha smiled: "I think so, too, Chickie. But rather the world's blindness. Some day we'll have a different attitude to this race of ours—to all children. We will do homage to motherhood. The coming of the child will in itself legalize the union which produced it. We will awaken to the absurdity of placing at the threshold of birth a paltry human placard reading: 'Thou shalt not pass!'"

"Life laughs at this and ignores it. The child comes! It is above the law. It's right to be; to live is the simple fact of its arrival. Its coming is mockery, complete and sublime of our barriers."

Without raising her eyes, but keeping her hand over her mouth to hide its tightness, its pitiful working: "That won't make it any easier for a girl like Kathryn or that Lily Tassman, will it? It seems hard that they should have to pay, and so many girls to-day do the same things and get away with it."

"They don't get away with it, Chickie. A woman never does! Life is not mocked or cheated but these girls are. They drain one shallow cup after another and in none is any vintage that satisfies."

"Oh—you don't know, Mrs. Blake! Why, they do get away with it. And they're just as happy as any one else in the world. I know. Why, I've been to house parties and all the girls came with their steadies—"

"Steady, Chickie? What do you mean?"

"Oh—the fellows they go with all the time and that other girls aren't supposed to flirt with—"

Martha ran her hand across her eyes: "Well—steady—that used to be servant girl talk—"

"It's slang, I suppose. But these couples went everywhere together, and there were week-ends galore. Some of them

thought that as long as they were engaged and were to be married anyway it was all right. Lots of them are married now and as happy as any one else. So they do get away with it! And others don't want to marry—they want to be free. They get away with it, too. They have everything they want and they go everywhere, and it's just one good time after another. You don't know—"

"No, I don't know, Chickie! Still I say they don't get away with it. A few years of this, and what have they? They come to the hollow forties and look back upon emptiness—they look forward to destitution of the heart and of the spirit. Saddest of all, Chickie, they are isolated; they have no connection with their kind, no link in the great immortality of the race."

"What good is that, Mrs. Blake? Janina says old-fashioned women are pawns that life uses for its own ends. She says the women of the past were duped. Life beat them over rough, hard places, and the lash she uses is love. And they run along with their backs breaking under their burdens. And in their hearts they wonder what it's all about and they envy women who are free, but they won't admit it. They get themselves into this blind alley and can't get out. So they rationalize their stupidity and call it nobility or virtue—"

Martha chuckled, her dark, beautiful face lighting. "Indeed! Rationalize our stupidity! I suppose my stupidity means Jimmy and Mary and Tommy, etc. But in ten years, Chickie, how shall Janina rationalize her license? Tell me that. I can look at my children, and it is easy to rationalize such stupidity as mine. Janina will look at her empty hands. What shall she rationalize?"

"Yes, but suppose your children weren't so good—suppose one of them did an awful thing that broke your heart? You wouldn't have any more compensation than Janina will have."

"Only a coward, Chickie, runs from a fight because there's a chance to lose. We have to take that chance—be brave to meet it—"

Chickie pulled her hat over her eyes. She wished to say to Martha Blake: "Oh, yes! Brave to meet it. I'm Kathryn Armour! What shall I do? Tell me! You tell me! Ho—you'll give me Mary's room—yes—let Jimmy know—"

She kept fooling with the hair about her forehead—shading her frightened eyes.

As she did this she was aware of some one at the door—

grinning: some one who had been there a long moment. Jimmy strolled over—gave her a push, making room for himself on her chair. He drawled teasingly: "Mother on the soap box, Chickie? Ain't she grand though—good old extempore! Been at it half a century more or less. Hire a hall, old lady. We'll all sit in the front row—"

Martha's face was radiant. Her eyes dwelt on the two of them—black head and gold. She said: "You may walk to the door with Chickie!"

Jimmy roared: "Now that's what I call a word to the wise! May I hold her hand?"

Martha whispered: "Chickie—if you hear from Kathryn, tell me."

Chickie nodded. She let her hand rest in Jimmy's. He said, when they reached the cottage: "Let me drop in a minute to-night, Chickie? I've a lot to say—"

CHAPTER LXXXIX

THE RETURN

CHICKIE paused at the steps. She didn't look at Jimmy. "You mean you're going to propose again?"

"Again and again!"

She shook her head.

"That means he's coming back, Chickie? It's all settled between you and him?"

"Well, Jimmy, darling, is that a nice, delicate question to ask?"

His face reddened: "'Scuse, Chickie! You see I had a hunch something different was up. Haven't seen him for about two months."

The mention of time startled her. She said hastily: "Not that long! Not quite, Jimmy! He's in New York."

Jimmy looked at her hands. He told her once years ago they were the prettiest hands in the world. He looked at her face. It grew pale under the tightened excitement of his eyes. Suddenly he said: "Oh—well, so long, Chickie!"

In her room she sat limp and trembling on the bed. She said blankly: "It won't last much longer—" This made the heat and the faintness go swelling up to her neck. She began to walk swiftly, disjointed images breaking into her thought. Jake, sitting opposite at the lunch table. He was doing this the last few days—meeting her; pressing her with invitations. Now Jimmy, shoving her half off the chair, making room for himself—

She knelt down before the bureau, pulling out the drawers, stacking her clothes tightly, saying to herself: "I'll leave—I'll go away."

She would have done this but for the hope that loitered in her heart. Her mind had long since evicted it; it went down and found a dwelling in the embers of her love. The hope of his coming. If only he could know—if she could get one word to him—

She went to a steamship company. The clerk was young.

He looked up all manners of tours for her, saying cheerfully: "Oh, yes—many of these tours only last a month or six weeks. Few are longer than three months."

Finally she inquired about the Gulf Steamship Company; gave the date Barry had sailed from New York. Could he find out when that boat was due to return?

Well—he guessed he could. Guessed he could do more than that. She might drop in the next day—keep dropping in—

At the end of the week he had the information. The boat was scheduled to end its run in the middle of August or thereabouts.

Chickie took the card with the dates neatly written. She looked at it quietly, her eyes glazed. She smiled. "You've been awfully kind about this—" Without a glance upward at the eager clerk she hurried to the street.

A month longer—he would be back—he would rush to her. Could she wait? Dared she wait? She went stumbling down Market Street, growing giddy with excitement and relief. Not so long—

Pictures of Mary and Lucy came into her mind. She made calculations—comparisons. She seized mightily, with a kind of madness, on this new refuge from her fears.

Another month—oh, let the dead quiet of his eyes reproach her; let the cold pallor in his voice shout that his love was gone. Let it! She would be saved—she would be freed—

She put the card under the scarf of her bureau. Each day that passed was a victory. One night Jonathan raised her chin upward: "You don't eat enough to keep a bird alive—does she, mother?"

Jennie smiled. "Girls don't to-day. It's the fashion. They must be toothpicks!"

Chickie risked boldly: "No toothpick here, Jennie, darling! I'm quite avoir du pois!"

They laughed at her. This heightened her sense of security. Now, when she hurried along Montgomery Street and other girls regarded her with appraising envy or the young men she knew stopped for a friendly word she was overjoyed; felt herself light—trim. Not a soul in all the world suspected her.

But by the middle of August she was so nervous the slamming of a door, the dropping of a fork made her start with terror. If any one stared at her she was ready to cry. Jennie said: "You need a vacation; you're getting pinched and tired."

"Yes! I'm going away soon. I think I'll take a month."

The day the steamer was due in New York Chickie sent a message. It was this: "Come at once! You must. Another week will be too late."

That week passed and another. She became ill with a cold, blind despair. She grew so pale that Janina wearied of twitting her; gave up inviting her to parties. With Chickie's last refusal she turned scornfully: "Stella Wilson was yellow, Chickie! But you've got a streak that runs from your head to your feet! Let any yapping pup crush you like this. Why don't you come out of it?"

Chickie laughed hysterically. "Like to know, wouldn't you? Ho!"

"You're losing your looks, if you must know it."

With a kind of craziness, Chickie answered: "Ho—long as it's not my figure, ole dear!"

After this she feigned merriment: she rouged; she took infinite pains with her dress.

The last day of August she went to the steamship company. The affable clerk came from behind the counter to greet her. He said pleasantly: "Well, we hit the date on the head, didn't we? She came in on the dot, on that trip."

Muteness froze her tongue—made her heart rigid. She knew that her lips whitened; they wouldn't smile. She said: "Yes—yes—on the dot." She turned and walked, shaking, from the place.

That night she said to Jennie: "I get my vacation next week."

Jennie's sweet eyes raised: "Well, I'm glad, dear; you need it; you're all worn out—"

And because her mother, standing behind the chair, ran her soft hand across Chickie's forehead, she fled into her own room, bursting into tears.

It was Tuesday, the first week of September. There was a box in Chickie's drawer, and on a day when she thought her heart was broken she had gathered all his letters, tied them here, writing on the cover: "Jennie or Jonathan: Burn this as is, please! By order of your darling Chickie."

Now she took this box and stole into the kitchen, lifted the cover from the stove, watched the clean, golden flames wreath about the many sheets—even about his picture.

Jennie said: "What destruction is this, dear?"

Chickie laughed: "Oh, your darling daughter's past!"

Strange the phone should ring just then. Chickie ran to it and even running, knew.

"You want to see me, Chickie?"

Quiet, like that. But it was thunder sweeping through her heart, opening it with joy.

She whispered in a voice all broken. "Barry? Really—you're here?"

"Yes."

"You're coming? To-night—oh, really?"

"Not to-night, Chickie. I can't. I've only a little while now—"

"Oh—Oh—wait—wait a moment—" She clung to the phone, fighting against the hardness in her throat. Finally: "I have to see you, Barry, please—"

"To-night, Chickie? Can you meet me then?"

He told her the place; the restaurant where they often ate—the booth they used to take.

In her relief it seemed that all her veins were melting—warmed. She kept crying as she tried to dress and murmuring to herself: "Stop—oh, I'll look a fright—oh, here! Here—"

And then her eyes grew bright; grew dewy and tender. She leaned on the comb, not knowing if she cried or if she laughed. She made herself most radiant. He might love her all anew, seeing lilies and stars about her. He might be glad—might want it all brought back again.

She kissed Jonathan; she laid her cheek on his. She ran back and kissed him again, pretending that she dropped her handkerchief.

And as she rode downtown ardent words of his sang in her memory. Their love was a lighted wave, magnificent, sweeping over cliffs; beauty in the power and the dash of it. Think of it like that—He did! Loved what was brave and free.

That morning he had come up the hill, finding her so broken, wiping her tears with his hand, whispering—a new, warm gentleness in all his look—"Love you, Chickie? Always—more than ever—a thousand times!"

Even at the last his memories of her were sweet and all his thoughts were filled with tenderness. He wrote that.

Now recalling it, a flame touched her spirit. There were prayers in her heart: "God—dear God—"

With a little light rush she went through the narrow passage to the booth, her pretty hand extended. She said: "Barry! I knew you'd come—Barry—"

CHAPTER XC

BARRY'S ANSWER

He was standing, the beautifully set head lowered. He raised it slowly. Chickie saw his eyes baffled. Her heart quickened and was hot.

But she smiled. She looked up at him and smiled—in a radiance of trust, expecting his hands to fold on hers; expecting the flush across his cheeks.

He said uneasily, holding a chair for her: "I got your message to-day, Chickie. It followed me here."

"Only one, Barry?"

"Yes—did you send others?"

"Oh—I did—"

"I got the one saying I must come. A week more would be too late. What does it mean?"

She bit her lips, feeling an intensity, almost an anger in the low throb of his voice. She remained still—very still, drinking back tears from her eyes. They went down and burned terribly at her heart.

He said more softly: "What did you mean by that, Chickie?"

But she could feel his eyes hot and demanding. She raised hers, imploring, not knowing what to say: "You know! Oh, Barry—don't you know. It's so!"

"Know what?"

She turned her head sharply, nodding: "Yes—yes—that—" The image of his face, suddenly white, like a dead thing, his lips shaking flushed with a mortal pain across her eyes. She repeated half moaning: "Oh,—you know—it's so."

He wouldn't understand. He made her say it. Then he sat there rigid and staring as though some inner poison sucked the blood, even the life, from his face. He spoke mechanically. "It can't be. I don't understand. You must be mistaken."

"I'm not! It's so."

He went on, driven. "It can't be. It's nearly four months since I left. You're mistaken, Chickie. You must be—"

She smiled anguish: "I'm not mistaken."

Then with a still, frightful coldness: "Why didn't you send me word sooner? Why did you wait so long?"

"I sent word—months ago—"

"I never got it! Where did you send it? How can it be, Chickie? At this time? I don't see—I don't see—"

She cowered against the assault of his denials, shutting her eyes because the blanched misery of his look unnerved her. She tried to speak; her mouth drew and drew. It got so tight she couldn't form the faintest sound.

After a little she put up her hand: "Barry—don't—oh, don't! Why—you think I want this? Ho—want you back now? Oh, no! What else am I to do?"

When he only sat moveless like a thing of stone, except that his hands shook, she covered her face.

He got up quickly, steadying himself. "God—I never dreamed of such a thing. I can't—Lord, Chickie, why didn't you reach me? If I'd known!" The table shook with his trembling. He said, abruptly: "Hurry—let's get out of here. We have to settle this—meet it. Not to-night. I'm late, Chickie. I have to go—"

She didn't stir. She felt that she was dying. In a vague, detached way she wondered why alarm possessed him so; wondered why he didn't say in the quiet way she had expected: "Awful—awful—but don't feel so. All right, now, Chickie!"

He waited, stooping a little, his hands gripped on a chair. Presently she stood up, fighting against the pulsing heat that pressed about her like waters of suffocation.

She glanced at him with white, beseeching prayer. Her eyelids flickered. She touched his arm. "Wait, Barry—wait—"

Moments passed. In these moments there bore upon her the deathless agonies she had endured. They made her strong, made her calm. She said, with a touch of proud nobility that stirred along his nerves: "You have to go, Barry? Oh, do you really? You want to get away? Oh, yes? Do you mean to leave me alone, then? What am I to do? I can't meet it alone. Oh—you can't do this, can you? After all—after all that was? I don't want you now—"

He said quickly: "Chickie—listen; I'm not running away! Of course not. A shock like this—we'll meet it—of course!"

She said in a low, aching breath: "When, Barry? We'll meet it? But I can't wait much longer. Every one will know! Barry—you mean that we'll be married—do you—"

"Chickie, listen—that won't settle everything, will it? We have to meet it. I'll do everything—everything you say. Come here to-morrow night. Say 8 o'clock. Oh, if I'd known! I wish to God I'd known!"

She swayed against him, a darkness of pain in her eyes. She said, weakly: "You're so white. Oh—you think I wanted this—do you?"

"No—no! Don't feel so, Chickie. I never dreamed of such a thing—such a shock. Does any one know it?"

She shook her head. But she held to his arm. "Barry—you don't want to marry me! I know—I see that—I don't want it either. But it can't be what we want now. We can't think of ourselves. Oh—we can't! I'm afraid—Barry, you may not come to-morrow."

"I'll come. You know I'll come. I'll be here. It won't do any good to go wild about it. Think of that, Chickie. Don't worry any more. I'm out here on business. I have an appointment for eight o'clock. It's much later."

He took her arm, whispering: "No use making it worse. We'll meet it."

He called a taxi: "I can't see you home, Chickie. You'll be all right. Don't worry. That won't solve it. Come here at eight."

As he helped her to the car, her fingers ran along his arm, loitered. "Barry, the way you look! It frightens me." She raised her face, delicate, shimmering with tears. She wanted him to kiss her.

His hands bit into her arm; the pallor of his lips became terrible.

But she smiled, her eyes entreating: "Don't you care at all—not—oh—"

He leaned down swiftly, untwining her fingers. He brushed her lips with his.

Afterwards she could feel that touch like an aching wound. He said: "To-morrow, Chickie. At eight. Well—don't worry any more... It will be all right."

She sank in a corner of the taxi. She didn't think. Queer sounds struggled at her throat. She shook them back. "No—no—a shock—of course. To-morrow—to-morrow—"

She shut her eyes—tried to still the chattering of her teeth.

She brushed her hair a long while that night. She walked

in her bare feet, quietly about the room, twisting her hands. But she said: "I won't worry. That won't do any good—"

Then she switched out the light, and in the darkness knelt at her bed. She was praying. She said again and over: "God—dear God—Oh, God—" There came to her a feeling of support—of something strong to lean upon.

It remained with her. During the next day it was a buoyant thing—like hope. She even smiled as she thought: "To-night—oh—"

That evening when she reached home there was a letter. It was typed. She took it quietly, went into her room, locking the door. She sat with the envelope in her hands, little beads of cold perspiration on her forehead. A presage, as of death, stole upon her.

Barry had written the letter. It wasn't signed. Nor was it clear and swinging, with a flash about its phrase. It was a broken, incoherent thing:

"I'm writing this, Chickie. I couldn't tell you. Nothing could be more ghastly. But you say it's so. I suppose you're certain. I can't believe it—can't understand it. Why should it happen now and not before? Things were the same.

"I'm not blaming you—You think that—but I'm not! Only it's monstrous for me. If you had reached me sooner, I would have come. Now—I'm not sure what to do.

"When I wrote you that last letter and you sent no answer, I was certain you felt the parting was the only thing for both of us. We had outgrown our feeling. It was better to end it so. Better for you and for me.

"No good recalling this, I know. And I won't try to dodge the burden—I'll do whatever I can, Chickie. We'll have to meet it, of course. It may not be too late yet.

"Or better—you can go away. Go down to Los Angeles and wait till it is over. No one need ever know of it. We can easily plan so that no word need ever be heard. It can be made easy for you, Chickie.

"Don't think that I don't care. I do! I'd give up my life this moment to wipe out the whole ghastly blunder—to take away this pain from you. In a way, it's more awful for me.

"But we'll arrange it. We'll have to. To-morrow night we'll settle it. I think the wisest thing is for you to leave at once. You can go down on a vacation. You can go down south

and wait there. I'll help you. I don't say this to hurt you, Chickie. I'll do what I can now—and afterwards I'll do whatever you think is right.

"I can't do as you ask. We can't be married. If I had got your message two weeks ago, I would have come. I can't now. Chickie—don't let this rob you of reason—don't let us make it any more tragic. We can still meet it sanely. I'll stick until it is over. And you'll have to, of course.

"But what you ask is impossible now. It would be tragedy enough, even so—now it is beyond choice. I was married two weeks ago—"

She read no further—she stared unbelieving at the words. They became dim—they faded in the strange gray fogs that swarmed about her. Her head dropped—

CHAPTER XCI

DESPERATION

SHE opened her eyes, shivering, a white thing of death in her hands. It was a letter. The word "Married" grew large, charred on the paper. She stared at it dumbly, bent forward and read it—then held the sheet upright and read it again. A wild, sobbing laugh tore from her throat.

She stood up, swaying—driving her hands against the weight of anguish that was now her heart—

Steps went down the hall, paused at her door. The knob twisted—Jennie calling. After a moment Chickie said: "Coming—just a second—"

She went into the closet—hiding—winding herself in an old dress that hung in the far corner. It was a blue dress he liked. He said it made her eyes such glowing stars of joy. Let him look in her pretty eyes. As long as he looked, he'd love.

She had clung to bonny things like that—believed them—dropped on her knees worshiping the glory of his uplifted face.

But she wasn't thinking now. Pulses beat—grew loud like thumping hearts, grew wild within her. She tried to hide from them.

Suddenly she put her finger on her lips—on the spot where his had touched. She pressed it against her teeth—hard.

Then she stole across the room, picked up the letter, spread it out on the bed and with dry, fevered eyes drank anew its distillate of pain.

He was so sure it hadn't mattered much to her; never dreamed that at the end, she cared. Why, she hadn't called him back! Hadn't even answered his letter!

And this thing that had happened was frightful to him. She could see that. It was ghastly. Yes—he remembered things—too many. They were crucifixion.

He could never escape them.

In a muddled, rambling way—never mentioning a name, but leaving her to guess—he told that he and Ila Moore became en-

gaged at the end of the tour, a month ago. It might seem hasty to her—but they'd known each other many years—they had been deep friends. And so much happened on the trip—so crowded was their life that the past seemed many years removed.

Their marriage had been planned for the following spring. But on the homeward journey her mother became ill. Her mother was now dying. So they went at once to Tarrytown on the Hudson and were married there quietly, because the mother wished it.

Did Chickie suppose he had the faintest idea of the tragedy that had overtaken her? Did she suppose he ever counted or feared such an outcome? Now that it was so, did she fancy that he was going free? That he wouldn't suffer? Oh—he would—

"But, Chickie, listen—don't let us make it any worse—don't make the blunder more awful. It has to be met—we can only do this if we look at it coolly. We've got to! I'll be waiting at eight o'clock for you. Then we'll arrange it all—Chickie, the worst is really over—in a way it is— It will be easier now—it can be made easy for you—"

She came to that and smiled in terror. The worst was really over! No—but it would be. She knew that—knew it now. Her pulse, thudding like hearts gone wild, whispered it: thundered to her thought the thing that she must do. Like a little girl, frightened of the awful dark, she shrank from it.

She said to herself slowly and with drawn lips—"Die—going to die." She looked about the room as though she had never seen it before. The heavy thump-thump at her throat made her breath heave. She said again but more faintly: "Die—"

And she kneeled at the bureau, took the bridal set from its tissues—from the pads of lavender Jennie had made. She touched the soft fabric; touched the tiny pink and blue flowers. She shut her eyes.

A voice reminded: "We'll arrange it all. The worst is really over. Come at eight!"

But her arms were limp. She kneeled a long while—her eyes closed.

Then, sitting on a chair because she had not strength to stand, she changed her clothes: put on the beautiful silken things. She pressed the palms of her hands together. They

were moist and cold; they trembled because of the moaning at her ears.

She tied and untied the pretty ribbons. She looked at her fingers as though they belonged to another. Suddenly there was a tear and another on the pink crêpe. She wiped them gently. She said quietly: "Don't cry—No—don't cry at all!"

Finally she was ready. Jennie was tapping at the door: "Chickie, dear—why, your dinner is cold—"

"Oh—oh, mother, darling—I'm dining out to-night. Did you forget?" And she added gayly: "You should see me, Jennie, darling—how beautiful I look!"

She was staring at her image, smiling at it. She went close to the mirror, her open hands against the glass, drinking the terror from her eyes; fighting the heat that brought such faintness to her brain.

Oh—her eyes were gray and beautiful above the tender thing that was her chin. There was a flush of red staining her throat; no color marked the pearl white of her face. She said dimly: "Well—" and moved from the bureau—

And with a little swift rush ran to those two waiting in the living room. She stood behind Jonathan's chair. The trembling went from her hands into her veins.

It seemed to her that she was falling—in a moment with a little soft cry she would sink in the great, kind arms; she would sink against his knees—oh, she would wind her hands about him—make him hold her there—he would—

She laughed: "Jonathan—Jonathan, dearest—" Her cheek was soft on his. She patted it; twined the old straggly mustache—

Then she kissed her mother. Then she said lightly: "Little Jennie—so sweet she is!" And tears of gladness ran to Jennie's eyes.

At the door she called back—I won't be in till late, perhaps—sleep, ole dears!"

Something in that caught her heart as though it tore and bled. She ran back to her room—looking for her purse. And kissed them both again and fixed the old, loved faces in her mind.

She rode down to Kearny Street and transferred. Her plan was clear. Once when the days were sweet they had gone to Fisherman's Wharf. One noontime it was. And they ate their lunch there.

A fisherman talking with Barry said the tide was swift and deep. What dropped there was never found. An Italian had stumbled from the pier. A friend saw the body fall. It was never seen again.

That was the way. No one would know. Drop into the heavy waters. Not even God could tell.

But it was dark now. Where were the boats, all blue and white, bobbing on the wave—shining in the sun?

Before her was the stone arch of a pier. Through this she saw bay—black, terrible; saw the flashing eye of Alcatraz, the restless spirit of the water. She turned her head.

But to the left was a round building—a massive thing, painted red, like old blood. She remembered. The gas works; but now it had a grim, forbidding look—an outpost of mortality.

She lowered her head, hurrying through the street. It was black; lumber piled on either side. Dim lights glimmered like the eyes of ancient owls. The terror within her made her knees weak.

She came to the wooden landing. She walked to the edge and looked down at the great round piers. She swayed and darted back, appalled. "No—God—oh, no—"

The light of Alcatraz swept in a wide, revealing arc. Lights of Sausalito twinkled like far, tiny stars. She crept back and hid against a pile of lumber. She said to herself: "I can't—Oh, God—God—"

Then she said—"Yes—now—quick—" and started to run, and couldn't.

She sat down. She wiped the moisture from her neck. She measured the distance to the waters. Ten feet at the landing there—At her side was a great horizontal beam. It stretched between vertical shafts. It was nearer to the water. It would be easy to wrap her hands about that—let herself down softly—let herself down easily.

She knelt. She slipped her hands under and they were wedged against the planks. She could do it! From here—Yes.

"No—no—go back—" The water was so dark—It looked so cold—

The wind sank cold about her—sank like the hand of death. She felt her life going—felt herself already dead. Suddenly she gripped the beam. She let herself down. Her feet were in the water. The wind loosened her hair. Now—let go! only a moment—

CHAPTER XCII

THE CROSS-BEAM

THE water lapped coldly at her feet. The night was dark. And she was letting herself down.

Her heart hammered like a mad thing; it pumped terror through her veins—made her neck tight. She could hear her own pulses in their frantic thump-thump. She looked down at the water and saw death. And the fear of it, convulsive and agonized, laid hold on her. She clung piteously to the beam. She sent a dim, broken cry, "Mother—oh, mother—God—," and would have pulled herself up—back—

But all things slipped—a wave swept over her mind. Its darkness became one with the dark of the sky and the water. She heard faintly as though from another world, a murmur—a sudden, glad sigh. Her lips smiled. Ah, death—this was death—complete and gentle. Holy death—it put its chill, kind breath in her mouth. She drank it and was free.

All at once she was aware of a frightful pulling and tearing at her elbows—a dragging at the pit of her arms. And she was awake hanging to the beam, her feet numb and frozen in the water. Awake, with terror screaming in her heart; her mind stark. She didn't know how long it had been—a life-time or a moment.

But she knew herself and the thing she had come out here to do. With a frantic shock she looked downward. Oh—the waters! But they hadn't come about her. She wondered, whimpering, why this was—why she hadn't died. Hanging here, with the darkness closed about her; hanging here with the wind, sinking, flapping her hat.

She had an idea that her clinging held her. And it hurt—it was anguish, that straining at her wrists. She wanted to slide down—into that tide—out—away—quiet again—that absence of thought; that sweet lull of death.

Loose her hands—let go! She tried to do this. There was no sensation in the numb fingers. Suddenly she knew that they were wedged between the beam and the plank; they were

jammed there. She had wrapped them so. And the weight of her whole, dangling body would not release them.

She tried to muscle herself up; get on a level with these prisoned hands, tear them loose. She would. She must. End this ferocity of pain.

She couldn't raise herself an inch. She had no leverage. And she hung there. Her thought reeled. It was glaring and hot. She murmured: "God—let me—oh, God!"

The hair blew across her forehead. It blew on her flickering eyes. This seemed a madness of cruelty.

Suddenly she felt on her mouth the kiss he had given. A wish to hurt the spot possessed her.

Her body swayed. As it did, she had an incisive image of the beautifully set head lowered; his baffled eyes returning to her. He was sitting in the restaurant now—waiting. He would wait long—

But then she saw Jennie with the glad tears running into her eyes; saw Jennie with her old head tilting proudly because her friend had looked with envious admiration at that Chickie of theirs—

Thinking this, the veins at her heart swelled; they were bursting. Now—Jennie would know. Jonathan would beat his head. They would come here in the morning and find her frozen to death. They would know she had done this fearful thing; they would know why. Mary would know—and Jimmy—the whole world—

She made a frantic, wild, tugging effort. She tried to jerk her arms from their sockets.

She heard a cry, shrill, protesting, opening the night like a red wound. She—crying out like that! God—that was she!

Men running along the pier. Two men. They stooped. They seized her elbows, raised her. One took her frozen hands and with a terrible strength tore them from between the cross beams. The flesh bled. She felt nothing. She dropped in some one's arms.

They laid her on the wooden planks. One said: "Better get an ambulance. Suicide, I suppose."

A wild thing leaped within her. Through the fogs heaving at her mind, these two peering faces became startling in their menace. She sat up, reaching out the poor, bleeding hands,

smiling vaguely. She touched the speaker, tried to say: "Oh, no! Why—I fell—I stumbled!" But she could only shake her head.

The man said to his companion: "Well—"

"Wait a bit—" And kindly to Chickie: "Think you're all right? Think you can walk?"

She got up then. She said in a voice that choked and strained: "Yes—"

But she staggered. The man helped her. He said: "Likely to try that again, Miss?"

"I lost my balance. I was sitting—"

"Bad place to sit, Miss—this time of night—"

She couldn't move her fingers. But she made her lips smile. This was the only thought in her mind—escape—get away. She said: "Please—I'm all right—please—"

"Walk then—let me see—"

She tried. She steadied herself along the lumber piles. She came back to him and laughed: "The car's not far—thank you—You're kind."

But he wouldn't let her go. "See here, Miss—you can't make it. Your feet are soaked. You can't walk. Better let me get the ambulance."

"Ho! I'm all right—please."

"But see here, Miss! mind you, don't sit here and lose your balance again." He took her arm, half carrying her to the car.

She dropped to a place in the corner, hiding her wet shoes, her dripping skirt. She was the only occupant now. She put her bruised hands in the wide sleeves of her coat.

Her wrists were iron things. They were enormous. They were in flames. She could scarcely bear their weight and their fire.

But her mind was cold. It was a lump of ice. The cruel chill of it bit through her nerves.

She sat low in the seat, staring from the window. She could feel the lapping of the water; the pitiless flare of the Alcatraz light; the massy dark and the wind, sinking like death about her.

Her eyes burned. Now the car taking her back was a fated thing, its wheels and their grind crushing her. She listened. Going back—each block nearer.

It became hard for her to breathe; hard to quiet the thing that thumped and was so frightened at her throat.

She knew that she must face it now. She would not wind her hands about the beam again. She would not hang there, dangling above the water. Face it—yes—

How? God—how? She cowered. She thought of Jennie and her father and the sickness of her mind put down the pain of her body.

At Broadway an Italian woman with a dark-eyed child of two or three got on the car. She took the place next to Chickie. The baby stuck out its foot, striking Chickie's arm. Pain shot to her mind in a flash of misery. She dared not raise her hands to wipe the tears running to the corners of her lips.

She bore it in a dumb resignation. Yet she wondered with a kind of childish panic if it were really she going through this bitter waste; was it really she that had run to the edge of the wooden pier and shuddered in horror at the thing that she must do; really Chickie, that Jonathan loved, who must now hide herself away; even must die? She that had been so glad and all of life a song—she that had loved the moonriding in clouds of flame. Had wanted some laughing, glorious other at her side!

Now—she scarcely dared to raise her eyes. And her hands were hidden there in the sleeves of the coat. Oh—her hands were shameful things. They would let the whole world know—

They made her know. It was she—And she must go through it—must stand up strong, somehow, and meet it—Oh, God!—But as though God cared! For her—now—

Oh—she mustn't think like this—tears rushing to her eyes—no hand to wipe them free—drink them back—that was the way . . . don't hide her hands—pretend she fell—say that to Jennie—laugh and tell what a tumble-tille she'd got to be! Jennie wouldn't guess.

She swayed. She was tired and wanted to sleep. And if she could have set her hand on anything then that would give surcease of thought; of all this driving anguish she would have given up her life. And gladly. There was no longer beauty in the sky nor music in the mountains marching to the sea.

So she had tried to dash away. And now she was coming back. And all the pain, with its wanton patience, waited.

She got off the car. Suddenly she remembered that she had no key. Ho—she laughed. Why—she hadn't ever intended to need the key again—

She would go through the alley—climb through the kitchen window. Wildie would hear. Would he bark? Would they be awake? It was only half past ten.

She leaned against a fence, her feet dragging. The Dillons lived in this house. Sarah Dillon went to school with Chickie. She was a plain, comical girl, full of heart. A light upstairs. Suppose it was in Sarah's room? Suppose Sarah should look out and see her faltering there against the gate? Suppose Sarah should glance into her mind and see its terror and its shame—

She hurried. It seemed to her that she was running into a bleakness, and there were no lights, not even one single star.

She turned sharply at the corner. Some one caught her arm. She cried out softly, but in terrible alarm.

It was he, Barry, and he said: "For the love of God, Chickie—for the love of God—"

She tried to break from him.

"Where were you? God, isn't it hideous enough—"

"Ho—let me go! Ho—what is it to you—"

But he held her.

CHAPTER XCIII

THE DISMISSAL

HIS face turned searchingly to hers. It was piercing in its white, quivering anxiety. "Chickie, where were you? Why didn't you come?"

She felt his hand on her aching arm, and this touch of his was more unbearable than the fainting hurt. She said dully, "You go—go now," and never looked at him.

They passed a lamppost. The light fell on them. In its glare he saw her drooping, saw her dragging, and the deathly pallor of her cheeks; then her feet, leaving wet prints on the cement. He stooped quickly and touched her shoes—the wet edges of her coat.

His lips shook. "Chickie, what did you do?"

She shut her eyes.

"Chickie—" He clenched her arm. The pain stabbed into her like red hot knives.

She reeled, pleading softly—"Don't—let go—oh, let it go—"

He did; her hands dropped heavy and limp to her sides. But she swayed and he put his arm about her waist. She had to endure it and his words. "Chickie—what did you do? Where in the name of heaven were you? This won't do any good. You'll only make it worse—make it frightful. Chickie—listen—"

She turned from him, mumbling—"Oh, go—go! I don't want you here—"

It seemed that he was beating her; his hands thudded on her raw heart.

They reached the steps. The little yellow cottage was all in darkness except for the hall light they left for her. Chickie leaned against the post, shoving his arm away. She wished to say a thing to him—say it quietly. But her mind was dim; it was far from her, sunk in heavy fogs. She leaned at the post, wondering vaguely if the kitchen window was latched; if she could open it with her tortured hands.

And she turned suddenly, running along the garden fence

to the alley. When he followed, she said with a little shrill moan: "Oh, go! You go!" And chanced to see his face. She stopped in shock. It was so pale; its mouth so drawn—a twisted, suffering thing.

"I'll not go! Until you tell me! Until you go in. Where were you, Chickie? What did you try to do? Your coat is soaking, and your shoes. Were you at the beach? Were you? Lord, Chickie, can't you see? This is terrible! This is the worst way in the world to do! Do you want every one to know? Chickie—listen—"

She went stumbling through the alley. He kept pace with her—begging—pleading: "What are you going to do, Chickie? Won't you speak to me? God Almighty—"

"Hush—they'll hear—"

"Give me your key—you better go in—"

"I have no key." She crept up the steps to the porch. The moon was soft on the climbing roses. Chickie reached the window.

He saw her hands with the swollen wrists; saw the skin torn. He leaned down and turned them palm upwards, his breath choking.

For a long while he held her hands, staring at them, biting his lips. She had no strength to draw away. She feared to speak.

He ran a hand heavily over his hair; there came a broken pleading in his voice: "Lord, Chickie—oh, Lord—what did you do to them?"

"Ho—ho—"

He trembled. And suddenly, opening the window for her, he pressed his face against the sash, hiding it with his upstretched arms. Like a figure hanging on a cross.

There was an oppressive stillness about him when he turned: "Chickie—bathe your hands. Put them in hot water—"

"Ho—my hands—"

He shuddered: "Don't go on like this. You can't! Chickie, there's only one thing to do now. Go away—I'll do anything—"

She felt an insane laughter tearing at her throat. But it made no sound. It ripped things—made the blood go warmly, in a heavy sickness round her heart.

She said again: "Go—go now—"

The dog whined. She gave a whispered cry: "Wildie—hush—" He came to the window.

Chickie tried to raise herself on her elbows, climb in. The pain, like a great, cruel hand doubled her.

He saw the ashen misery; saw the wincing. He put his arms about her. "You'll have to let me help you—" He lifted her gently and he said to her: "Oh, God—Chickie—"

The dog raised his paws to her shoulder. She buried her head in the sleek mane. Without a look outward, she sank on a chair in the corner.

Many moments. The window closed softly—

Chickie pressed her mouth against the dog's head—sat there, her hands hanging limp. She heard feet going down the steps—out the alley. She rocked herself, moaning: "God—oh, God—"

And presently she went into the bathroom and held her hands under the hot water. Her teeth drove through her lips. But she half smiled. She said to herself: "Ho—my hands!"

She kicked off her shoes and hid them in the closet—hid her coat away; going about her room with a stealthy caution. Jennie was never to know.

She lay awake, staring into the dark. Sometimes she held her arms upward because this seemed to ease their flame; their iron weight. Sometimes she let them hang over the side of the bed, and then the agony stopped her thoughts. And tears ran away from the corners of her eyes to the pillow.

When she turned, she felt the wind sinking against her head; felt the darkness closing about her and that flapping of her hat—

She lay rigid, seeing herself kneeling on the pier, staring at the black waters. Terror lapped at her heart. She said, moaning: "Bear it—I can't do that again."

She knew that she wouldn't. No—she would never ride out there and run like a crazy thing behind the lumber piles. Not again.

But when she said to herself: "Bear it—" she turned miserably. Go away—yes—oh—that's what he wanted—hide away—but where? No thoughts came to her—only images. First it was an image of Jennie, pattering in the closet, coming upon the soaked and ruined shoes, holding them up with a frightened: "Why, look at these!"

Then it was Janina, saying with narrowed eyes: "Going away? So? I wonder why?"

Then it was Jonathan: "Leave us—Chickie girl? You mean to leave your old dad—"

She went through this hour after hour. She got up sometimes and bathed her hands. She was afraid of the morning; afraid of the questions they would ask.

When finally it was light—when finally Jennie tapped at the door with a bright: "Late, Chickie! Better be getting up." She answered:

"No—Jennie dear—I've a day off—vacation starts—" Then in a sudden inspiration she called out: "Jennie, darling—come here—"

As Jennie came in she said: "Some one phoned last night, Chickie—a young man—he phoned twice. Do you know what it is?"

She bluffed: "Let him ring again, mother. 'Twill wait. But look, Jennie. I fell last night—hurt my hands—look—"

Jennie's face grew pale—she touched the bruised skin. "My—my goodness!"

Chickie said: "Oh—it's nothing—but doesn't it look gorgeous and awful sore?—after a bit you can bathe them—how's that?"

Jennie smiled and brought the basin—she believed.

Before Chickie was up, there came a registered letter. It was from him.

"Chickie—give me a chance to say something. Come and see me to-night. The same place. If you won't, then you'll have to let me help. I'm sending this—not to hurt you. You can understand. If it's frightful for you—it's hell for me. I'll do my share—such as I can now—"

In the sheet and folded was a \$100 bill.

She stared at it. The last pulse in her heart chilled. Then she folded the bill between two blank sheets of paper. She wrote, with a hand that could scarcely form the letters, his name on the envelope—and sent the thing back to him.

CHAPTER XCIV

THE WEDDING RING

CHICKIE dropped the letter in the mail box and trembled. He was the one link between her and the world; one link of human sympathy. This letter broke it. She stood alone—in desolate and piteous aloneness.

She felt this isolation—felt it dropping about her like a mantel of ice. And standing there in the gracious September sun, glancing at the houses she knew; seeing women coming out with market bags—seeing all this, she could have covered her face and wept. She would have been grateful to walk at the side of these old acquaintances, listen to their banal gossiping, laugh with them, if only she might keep step with the heavy feet; if she might hold, and always, the clasp of these old, warm hands.

But she knew now that she was an exiled thing—she must draw this mantle quickly; draw it close about her, and smile—let her heart thunder as it would in fright and protest. She must leave now—no matter where—but she must.

Yet she walked lightly down Twenty-second Street to the drug store. She telephoned to Lewis. She had fallen and sprained her wrists. She'd have to lay off the rest of the week.

Wildie trotted at her side. Whenever she looked at the dog she thought of Jake and blessed him. It was something to have that pair of eyes fixed on her in rapt devotion—something to feel this throb of companionship—what if it was but a dog's.

They went up hills. At Sanchez was a great rocky lot. Below this the city spread out like an immense and many colored fan. They sat here. Chickie could see the bay. It shimmered. It was so clear and blue. It bore the ferryboats on its tranquil breast—

Last night it was black. It was heavy and terrible; and a wind had blown whippingly about it. She began to shake; moisture was in little dots on her lip. If she had only dropped quickly then—only run in and jumped . . . Over now—all

ended—swept out on the careless ocean—far out. They would never know—never in the wide world guess the thing that had come upon her.

It would have been better—much better. Those two would now be weeping in their sad quiet; they would have visions of her, pretty as an angel. When a door opened they would start thinking she was coming back to them. They would hear a distant note of music and fancy her singing about the house. So all their pictures would be softened with remembered joys. And in the end they would grow used to grief.

Grief can be borne—not disgrace. They would thank her to spare them this—Oh—they would—

And she must! Never have Jonathan's proud head cast down! Never have the old giant stooping at his gate—because of her that was his light—

She looked at her stiff and swollen wrists. She held them out. Wildie raised on his haunches and licked them. Because tears gathered in her eyes, she shook her head in violence. Cry—yes—too late for tears—

Yet her mind shrank in a mortal reluctance—shrank against this ruthless breaking of her life and all its aching ties.

She realized now how consumingly she had counted on his coming; on his reaching down to take her hands; stand beside her; even with the quiet in his eyes. She could have been brave then—brave for anything—

But he had pressed his face against the window sash, covered it with his upstretched arms. She saw him so. There came a muteness in her spirit. She would never feel again—never—

She thought a long while. Finally she decided. She pressed Wildie's head against her knees. "Want to come with me, dog? Well, you better. I don't know just where—far off—ever so far."

That afternoon Jennie sewed in the living room. The sun streamed on her faded hair. She had sat like this years ago making the party dress with the little silver flowers. Chickie wished to be near her mother. She wanted Jennie's hand. She drew a little stool and sat at her feet. She said flippantly: "Well, old love, I'll soon be on my way."

Her throat clutched saying that.

"Where are you going? Do you know?"

"Some of the girls I know are going to a ranch for a month. I've an idea that would be very nice, otherwise—"

Jennie wanted to know where, and who were these girls, and if it was a convenient place.

Chickie said: "Oh, up in the San Joaquin Valley, far out—you have to stage to get there. I'd like that. I think I'll take a month."

"Yes—you need it." Then, with the shyness that she could never overcome, "Chickie, aren't you very quiet lately?"

"Ho—am I? Well, now, getting on in years, you know."

"Chickie, do you hear from Barry?"

"Of course."

"Often? Does he write often?"

"Often enough I'll say."

"I had an idea that he was at the phone last night."

"Ho! Did you?"

"Does he mean to return, Chickie?"

"Weighty question, Jennie, ole thing! Maybe he do and maybe he don't! Tish! I should worry!"

"Sometimes I think you're pining for him—"

"Ho! Ha ha, Jennie! We don't pine in this day and age! We up an' look for another—"

Jennie drew a deep, pained breath: "But I've noticed—I've noticed lately—"

Chickie said tensely: "What have you noticed?" The weight of her heart robbed her of breath. She reached up and took Jennie's hand and pressed it against her cheek.

"You're too young, Chickie, to grow sad—"

Chickie ran her lips against her mother's hand. She shut her eyes. Then she rested her head on Jennie's knee. She had a wish to draw the plump, soft arms about her—a wish to hide there. She said with a muffled laugh: "Sad, mother? Not I!" But she kept the warm hand against her face . . . held fast to it as one does to the beloved hand of the dying.

Now when she looked at Jonathan or at her mother, there was agony alive and tugging at her throat. She could see their eyes filled with unbelief—searching her—incredulous that she would push this sorrow on them.

Sunday she read the advertisements in the paper. She found one that seemed right to her. An elderly lady, owner of a ranch, would board a young girl reasonably—permit her the use of horses and a buggy. The ranch was in the San Joaquin. She answered the ad.

Each breath she drew seemed now building between her and

the old, happy life, a cold impenetrable wall. She kept saying to herself—"Hurry—oh, hurry—" Her mind would not hear the plea.

In all she did was the mournfulness of farewell. She poured Jonathan's coffee, thinking: "Soon—oh—" and her hand faltered offering him the cup.

But the craft that came to her assistance astonished her. She went to the office on Monday. She said to Lewis: "My folks are moving to the south. Of course I want to be with them, so I'm quitting."

He argued with her. Mitchell wouldn't permit it. Was it a question of more money? They could arrange that. She said with quiet emphasis: "Well—it's impossible, Mr. Lewis. I can't leave my family."

Sever every connection!—they wouldn't be phoning to Jennie—wouldn't be making inquiries.

She told the same story to Janina but added: "I'll take my vacation first, of course. Off on a ranch, Janina, old dear—whole month of it—"

Janina glanced at her with narrowed eyes; touched the still swollen wrists. She said, with one of her odd flashing looks of kindness: "Thought the hands were a stall, baby. Not so? But you heard the news, I suppose? Thought that was what kept you home."

Chickie knew what she meant. She nodded. "I heard."

"And did you know he's been here in town?"

"Yes." Chickie kept her eyes lowered.

Janina said: "Tough, ole dear! Darn sight better now than in five or six years hence. You won't see it that way for a while. But you'll live to look back on it and laugh. I know!"

Chickie laughed then: "Oh, I daresay, Janina, dear! 'Twill all come out—if not in the wash—then under the iron! What of a few burns, I arsk."

That afternoon she went to Oakland. She leaned over the bow of the boat, her breath charged with fright as she thought of her errand.

Simple thing. Yet her hands shook with the vision of herself walking into a store, asking for a wedding ring. She meant to do this.

But she walked about Broadway, looking in the windows. There were trays—some with the wide, old-fashioned yellow bands; then the very narrow platinum and white gold.

She saw one with delicate carving—white gold—\$8.00 marked on the card. She decided to buy this but she caught a glimpse of the clerk. He was young with reddish hair. He smiled at her. She hurried away.

In the next block a thin, tall, old man stood behind the counter. She went in. She said with a vague laugh: "Let me see the wedding rings. You have one in the tray like I want."

He brought the tray. She picked up a thin band: "Oh—it's the one. I've lost mine. I must have it right away. Will you mark it?"

She wanted the date of August a year ago. She told him to mark it J. to M.

Two hours later she called for it.

She went into the dressing room on the boat. She tried it on her finger—stared at it. She leaned against the wall and cried.

CHAPTER XCV

THE LEAVE-TAKING

ON a spring day a year and a half ago there had been a different seal on Chickie's finger. That was the day of promise. They sat under their tree. He told her, not impulsively as he had the months previous—but with a dark, intent glory in his eyes he told her that he loved her. But they'd have to wait—wait and wait.

Pooh—she laughed. Years weren't so long. What of five or six and hearts are young! She had taken his face in her palms; she had pressed the fourth finger of her left hand against his lips, making him kiss it, murmuring in a radiance of joy: "Now! Do you see what you have done! Oh, stunning, isn't it!"

She told him he had put a seal on her finger. It was his now—that finger. They were each other's—always. Nothing would alter that. Just then a bird winged upward with such rhythm to the sky the eucalyptus swayed so wistfully that tears and songs ran all together in her thoughts. Oh—love was pure and beautiful—a thing of music and of dreams—

Chickie looked at the wedding ring, letting the storm and bitterness shake her. Her spirit wasn't changed. She could yet fancy life garmented in silver; yet muse with tender yearning for the sweetness and the youth that was passed. She half wondered in a baffled way, like a child that has been cheated, how all this had come about; why she should be standing here in the dressing room of a boat crying against the wall.

The future pressed upon her, inescapable and weighted—iron chains forged to her neck. She wrapped the ring in her handkerchief, tying it in a knot, tucked it under the lining of her purse. Then she sank her teeth in this finger—bit it hard. The red marks turned blue and deepened.

Jennie was waiting for her at the door. An excited flush stained her cheeks. "That same young man phoned, Chickie. He phoned twice."

Chickie steadied herself on the gate post, hot then cold with indignation. "Persistent, isn't he?"

"His voice is so like Barry's."

"Ho—was the phone call from New York, Jennie dear?"

"Now I don't know. He didn't say. He's to call again." Jennie had a letter in her hand. Now she remembered it. "For you, dear—special delivery."

Chickie came up the steps with affected indifference, stopping to pluck the lavender sweet peas. "That's from the office, mother. My check—I told them to be sure and send it."

It was from him. Chickie closed her door and stood against it. She was shaking with anger—with a sudden pity for herself. Why need he make it harder—why should he write—

She didn't wish to open the letter; yet she wondered coldly what he could find to say. And as she read, she had an image of his face with the young, full mouth drawn and haggard:

"I waited till midnight for you on Thursday, Chickie. Then I got your enclosure back on Friday. I half expected this—but will it do any good now to act so rashly?"

"Perhaps you can think more calmly at a distance from me; perhaps you can realize that only the utmost caution and foresight will carry you through this. So I don't know what you're going to do if you won't look at things sanely. Why let this bitterness against me hurt you still further? There's been tragedy enough.

"To meet the future you'll need money. However hard it may be to take it from me, it is surely better to endure this than to run the risk of open disgrace. Look at it that way.

"You ought to leave now. Go to Los Angeles or Fresno and take a small apartment. It will be better to tell your folks you're going on a vacation. Later write to them that you've been offered a good job and you want to work in the south for a few months. That will be easier than a sharp break. When it is over you can return. And if you plan well, no one need ever know of this. It has been done before.

"I'm leaving to-day. I'm forced to. You can reach me in care of the company. Just send me your address and I'll see that you don't lack for funds."

She struck a match and held the folded letter in her hand, letting the flame lick along the edge; watching the white, thin spiral of smoke. The tips of her fingers burned. But the charred paper held together, molding itself—a great, black lily.

She felt a twisting—then a shiver as when a thing dies. It was the last pulse of her love. She wept because it was so still.

Yet her caution seized his advice. Go away blithely—pretend it was just for a vacation—later write and tell of some glowing job. But not in Los Angeles. The two older Blake girls lived there with their families.

Then, people she knew were always taking trips to the south. She was afraid of a big city—afraid of any place where many people gather. Her instinct sought remoteness—some far, deserted spot without enchantments—without lures to bring visitors. So she had fastened on the idea of a ranch, distant from any town.

Wednesday and Thursday she went down to the postoffice seeking an answer to her letter. She had given her address as "General Delivery" and her name as "Mrs. John Clayton."

Standing in the wide corridor, she glanced about furtively and hurried to the window. Friday the letter came. She rushed from the building, walking swiftly toward Howard Street. The strong, regular handwriting reassured her. Then the signature, "Agnes Robbins."

She liked the name of Agnes because of "David Copperfield" and his beautiful love. People with that name had a kindness and a charm for her.

Mrs. Robbins was a widow, and since the death of her husband the previous year she had managed their ranch. She did the cooking for the men. There were no other women about. It was lonely. She advertised for a boarder, more because she wished company than for the money entailed.

If Mrs. Clayton wanted a rest, if she didn't mind solitude and the company of the ranch hands at the meals, then the widow was certain she would be pleased. It was an old ranch house, but the room was airy and latticed with grape vines. The rate was \$9 a week for board and room.

Chickie bit her lips, reading all this—solitude and the company of ranch hands—such a sparkling vacation—so gay—

Little more than a year ago—that August on the river—oh, the heart free preparations! And swinging in the hammock under the madrones. A year gone—brightness and the light, happy song—gone—

Fever sped through her. She could feel her eyes burn. She walked back to Market Street—went into the waiting room of

the Emporium and hastily wrote her acceptance. Agnes Robbins might expect her on the train Monday.

She went to the bank and drew out all her money. She didn't need to take funds from him. There was pride in that.

That January when she had received the raise and had so jubilantly said to him: "I'll save—why, in a year I'll have \$300—enough to furnish the living room—" he had frowned.

But she had saved. Later after her return from the river and she had waited with such passionate unrest for the day when they might marry, she had saved more. She thought: "I'll have \$1,000 and that will be a gift to both of us!"

In all she had \$813. She took it in currency, putting it in an envelope and sealing it.

As she walked out of the bank she said to herself grimly: "Well—shroud and coffin all bought! Bring on the corpse!" She was shaking—a burning hand at her throat—a weakness in her knees.

She was afraid that she was going to scream—that she was going to rush against that stone building there and beat her hands; or that she was going to sink down in the street and cry.

When she went home and all Saturday, she went about, tremulous—starting with bitter impatience at the slightest sound. Jennie said: "Chickie dear—why you're all upset! And you going off on such a fine vacation!"

They were both in Chickie's room and she was gathering her clothes—putting them in a trunk. Jennie kept running to the kitchen to press out a dress, to get tissue paper. Chickie hid her face now in the folds of silk. She had a wild impulse to say: "Mother—oh, mother—I'm not coming back—do you know that! Tell that to Jonathan! Oh, yes—"

Sunday she followed Jennie to the garden. She helped her train the vines. Afterward she combed Jennie's hair. She tied a blue ribbon at Jennie's neck—"To match your pretty eyes, mother darling. I got my eyes from you, didn't I?"

Jennie blushed. She looked up shyly and smiled. "Your father says you did."

She made a great fuss over Jonathan. She manicured his nails to "keep him dashing for the fair ones" while she was gone. She sat on his lap and held her face near his. But when she tried to speak, no word at all would come. He felt her tears and said: "Chickie, girl, you make believe. Ah, you'll not be thinking a bit of your old dad to-morrow night."

She said, pleading and quiet: "Oh, never think that, Jonathan—Jonathan, darling—"

She lay awake all night. She got up once and stood outside their room. Her father snored. She listened until her trembling made her teeth chatter. She wanted to go in and kneel at their bed—kneel there and kneel. If she might die like that—

CHAPTER XCVI

THE NEW HOME

AT the last moment she faltered. It was when Jonathan put his arms about her, raising her chin in his great, rough palms. With a roguish chuckle, he slipped a ten-dollar bill in her hand. "For stamps, Chickie girl—now mind you write to us every day—"

She couldn't bear to have him holding her face back like that—seeing her chin double and the swift tears. "Oh, don't—don't, Jonathan."

He looked at her sharply. "Well—crying! No little spring bubbling to-day?" Still he held her face. "Mother—look—she doesn't want to go—likes us, I guess."

Chickie forced her head down, pressing against his shoulder. She wound her arms about his neck and clung to him.

And he laughed, thinking it was just her sweetness, just the pretty angel-ways of her. She whispered against his grizzled old neck: "You better love me, Mr. Jonathan—better love me a lot—"

She kissed Jennie and ran her hand flippantly, tucking up the faded hair. But she didn't meet her mother's eyes—nor Jonathan's.

She ran from them with her head down, calling to the dog—hurry—not a moment to lose—or she would drop down before them both and give her aching heart into their hands.

They stood at the door. She looked back, reaching out her hand in a sudden wild appeal. They thought she waved. She saw smiles on their faces. Tears made her blind.

That was the way she left them.

She had to put Wildie in the baggage car. So she was alone, and a thing quivered like an alarm in her thought. She sat low in the red plush seat, staring with an intent concentration from the window—a fence with white letters scrawled; a cow, motionless as the shrubs; line of trees; boulders in a dry creek. The throbbing in her mind grew louder; grew frightening. Never coming back—running away—leaving those two—not telling them—

She got up quickly and went to the baggage car. She took the dog's head and pressed it. He gave a sharp, impatient whine. Her hands trembled. They shook with a strange, internal cold.

One o'clock—they were reaching the station. She stood on the platform holding the leash. No one else getting off.

A dingy, yellow shed in the midst of a vast, silent plain. Her trunk bumped off, the conductor smiling, taking her valise, helping her. Whistle—the train leaving—the quiet, the noon heat; the rhythmic heaving of the earth's bosom—and she stepping into it—the pulsing solitude closing about her.

No line but a shrub here and there to break the flat monotony. But in the distance were hills—clear, blue, filmy, like hills made of the sky. They stretched into the limitless reaches—sun-touched, gleaming. Chickie fixed her gaze on these far hills. She pressed her hands against her throat, wondering why it tightened so; why there came such bewildered thumping at her ears.

Down the white, parched road came a machine, honking insolently in the still face of the valley. It was the man from the ranch—the man to take her trunk, drive her to the house. A little, dried-up, wiry fellow with a twanging voice and a sharp, canny eye. He touched his hat with a short, jerking motion: "Bound for Miss Robbins' place, Miss? Nice day, ain't it?"

Chickie smiled and took her place beside him. He settled down, a pipe in the corner of his mouth. They drove through the quiet, sun-baked acres. Now and then they passed a barn, a lonely farmhouse and fields with dry stalks of corn and beans. The man gave a jerk with his head: "Harm's place, that. Harvesting the corn now," or "Smith owns that. His wife ran away two months ago. Mean fellow, Smith!" Again, with a grunt of satisfaction: "Kibbe—Mr. Harold Kibbe's place. Farms by a book. City fellow. Lost five thousand the season just gone. Know Miss Robbins a long while?"

"No."

"Fine woman, Miss Robbins. Here we are!"

An immense red barn, cows in a pasture, white rambling house with peaked roof and a walnut tree to the side. All about were the fields—dried now—level and flat. In the distance against the horizon were the hills, pallid and blue. Chickie felt the stillness and the heat and the unbroken monot-

only close down on her like a wall. She was oppressed, and at the same time relieved.

There was a porch about the house. Agnes Robbins came out to meet her. Her sleeves were rolled up. Chickie noticed that her arms were long; they were beautifully shaped. The hands were slender, strong, but roughened.

She was a tall, supple woman, about fifty. She spoke in a deep, resonant alto. Chickie stared, fascinated at her face. She wore her black hair slicked back from her ears, but with very heavy straight bangs covering her forehead. The eyes were dark, snapping; the mouth severe, passionate, even a little hard. The wrinkles of her neck seemed out of place. They challenged the general air of youngness and fire that was in her face. It was a magnetic face, but inscrutable.

Her speech was out of harmony. She said with a note of warmth, almost ingratiating: "Mrs. Clayton? Come in, dearie. Did you have a nice trip? Too hot, isn't it? Now you just come right down to lunch. You can dress afterwards. You'll excuse me, dearie? This is my busy time. Your room is ready. At the top of the stairs. It's the only one. You'll like it—"

She gazed at Chickie's face and at her dress. She patted Chickie's hand and seemed flushed with triumph as she said: "I'm so glad you decided to come. Gets lonesome here."

Chickie was pleased but disconcerted. She had pictured Agnes Robbins as a plump, motherly sort with a large, ruddy face and blonde hair turning gray—a woman who had reached the calm of life; not one with fires smoldering.

Now she was a little afraid. She wondered if this was the place—if she might really rest here, secure.

The room at the top of the stairs was long and narrow with many little windows, and these were hung with a flowered dimity. The roof was peaked, irregular, roughly beamed. From these beams baskets of Wandering Jew were hung. There was a cool brightness, like a peace in the place.

There were but two men on the ranch now. Chickie's place was set at the end of the table. The two men ate and didn't speak. Once the wiry fellow, who had driven her out and whose name was Billy, said confidently: "Guess you'll like it here, Miss, if you don't get too lonesome. City folks likes the noise."

She answered: "I like the quiet."

But she felt so strange and so quiet within herself—like a person she didn't at all know—that she couldn't eat. She wanted to get back to that room, sit at the little window and look out to the far hills. Plan and think.

She did this. She sat there all the afternoon, her hands folded in her lap. Agnes Robbins brought her a glass of lemonade. She said to her: "Do you mean to stay long, Mrs. Clayton?"

"Perhaps a month—maybe two or three—I'm not quite sure—" Then Chickie told the story she had prepared. Her husband was a mining engineer. He was in South America now and would be there for quite a while. She had come up here to rest.

"You look a little tired."

Chickie started. But she couldn't bring herself to go on—wait a while—to-morrow—some other time would do.

"But I'm not so sure that I'll be here myself three months from now. We have the place up for sale. You see my husband and I were not farmers by calling. We came here five years ago. I never lived in the country before. It drove me half crazy in the beginning. I rather like it now."

Agnes Robbins told in a vivid, sketchy way of her early life. She had been on the stage as a girl. She had traveled all over the country. Her husband was a musician. In his fifties he became melancholy. So they thought a ranch was the thing for them. It hadn't proved so. She was restless to get away now that he was gone.

Chickie asked: "Is any one planning to buy it?"

"Oh—it's a good place if the right person manages it."

Chickie laughed: "Well, I hope you don't sell for a while."

"Perhaps we shan't—"

In the evening she took a walk. It was still warm. The quietude grew. It touched her like a subtle presence. It gave her a subdued, beaten feeling. At the end of a field was a mound under an oak tree. She sat there. She began to figure in an absent, forlorn way, then with a vivid, uneasy panic.

She said to herself: "Five months—maybe longer—" Nights and nights like this—days and days—with the quiet and the heat and the appalling aloneness. She was afraid, merely thinking of it. The long imprisonment began.

CHAPTER XCVII

SUBTERFUGE

THE stream ran through a narrow gorge. High above its flowing was a grassy bank, cloistered with oak trees. Sun dappled like silver coin through the branches.

Here Chickie sat—long hours. Sometimes Wildie lay at her feet—other times he was bounding off through the thickets after a rabbit. Chickie watched the wild, frightened thing flying across bare stretches; the dog leaping after it. She shuddered; she was the rabbit.

Everything on the ranch forced to her attention the thought of herself. One afternoon she saw a calf born. The mother cow was in a narrow enclosure. She bellowed—a loud, protesting, pitiful sound. There came then a great concourse of all the other cows. They thrust their noses close to the wire fencing. They answered the mother's complaints in a ludicrous chorus—bellow for bellow. Something touching about it—a kind of blind sympathy in this herding together against some incomprehensible woe. Agnes Robbins and Billy were doubled over in their laughing.

The little calf was a pretty thing—white and brown. It wobbled. It lay quiet as the mother licked it. Then getting up, it wobbled again. It looked around in amazement as though it had been wronged. So Chickie fancied. This too made her think of herself.

Yet she was more at peace here than she had been in many, many weeks. She had a letter now from Jennie. Jennie was so glad she was enjoying herself. Of course, let her stay the month—they missed her—but if she was happy—why—did they ask more than that—Chickie knew—

Her mail had been a great problem. In the first week when she wrote, she sent no address, pretending to have forgotten. She couldn't have letters coming out to Miss Helena Bryce.

She brooded over this, considering one plan, then another. She could rent a box in the postoffice of the little town five miles distant, giving her real name. And she could call here

for her mail. She dismissed this. In a small town she would soon be known—they would find out where she was staying—a dozen explanations necessary.

Finally she made a trip to Stockton, registering at the hotel in the name of Helena Bryce. It was so that Jonathan and Jennie, Janina and Mary would address her. So she made friends with the clerks, but especially with the telephone operator.

This was a young girl, Miss Wreden—quiet, serious and enormously flattered with Chickie's attention. Chickie remained at the hotel several days. She took Miss Wreden to lunch—went shopping and helped the girl select a dress. She had found a staunch admirer. She decided to trust the girl. It was the only chance she saw.

One day she said laughing, and in a very off-hand manner: "Can you keep a secret, Dorothy?"

The girl answered with a flush of pleasure: "Yes."

"Then I'm going to tell you what only you and two or three others know. I happen to be married. My name is Mrs. John Clayton but I'm keeping it dark. There are reasons why I can't have my folks know. But, of course, I want my letters and now that I'm off on a ranch I can't come these thirty miles every day to get them."

"And you want me to watch out for them and send them to you?"

"Yes—but I want them in envelopes addressed to Mrs. Clayton."

"I'll be just glad to do it."

Chickie wrote home then and ordered her mail sent to the hotel. It was a link—perhaps a faulty one—but she had to forge it between her old life and the new one.

Letters came almost every day. She answered them glowingly. Oh, the freedom of this open life; the joy of lying under trees, reading and sleeping; and the interesting things about animals that she learned—why, even a pig was not to be despised; the little fellows were as cute and as clean—

Folding these bright, sparkling deceptions into their envelopes she had a spent, exhausted feeling. She would gaze out to the far hills, wondering how long she could keep this up; wondering what new subterfuge she must invent—and if in the end they would fail—

Whenever this fear seized her, she walked. She wore her-

self out with these walkings. Once she stopped suddenly and said aloud: "Christmas—I'll be away from them Christmas—" She could hardly breathe.

Often now she sat dully near the stream. She tried not to think. She held herself in a stony apathy, but tears went scalding along her throat. They burned her heart.

And she said: "What will I do then—I wonder what I'll do then—" By that she meant when it was over and the child was born. She bit her lips together, her eyes on fire. She prayed with a low, frantic pleading. "Oh, Lord God—"

She would fancy that she was to die and the child would die too. She hoped for this. She looked into the water steadfastly and murmured brokenly—"Oh—oh—"

In colder moments she was certain that this escape would not be hers. No—it would be relentless. She must face it to the bitterest fullness. She lay awake at night and went through imaginary conversations with Mrs. Robbins. Perhaps she could leave it here and come up every week-end.

But she was never certain of Agnes Robbins. The woman petted her, followed her about—hungry for companionship. When Chickie had been there three weeks they sat on the porch one evening. A crimson glow set the pale beauty of the hills in flame.

"This is the best time of the twenty-four hours. We should sleep in the day and live by night," Agnes Robbins began. Then she told of experiences in her theatrical career—one night stands—hotels that were but cardboard boxes, and the strange comedies and tragedies that went on and were overheard behind these paper walls. She talked—she had a rich, tumultuous past. Suddenly she said:

"Why did you come up here, dearie? With that face of yours to bury yourself—"

Chickie imagined that Agnes Robbins had begun to suspect. Now she tilted her shoulders with a quick, affirming laugh and opened her hand in a revealing gesture: "Can't you see, lady?"

"Well—you don't tell me? When? A long while yet, no doubt?"

"Yes—ages—"

"I suppose you'll go down to the city for the big event—"

Chickie gasped: "Oh—I don't know—I'm not quite sure—"

"Well, of course you could go in to Stockton or out to the

town. We have a fine doctor here—a nicely equipped hospital at that—”

Chickie was now so alarmed she clenched her hands. They were dry and hot. She said, “Well, I’ve not decided.”

“Mr. Clayton will be back, of course.”

“Ho—ho—that’s just what makes it rather hard; he can’t be here. At the earliest, he won’t return till next June.”

Mrs. Robbins reached over and patted Chickie’s hand. “Never mind, dearie, you’ll come through it all right. We’re all afraid the first time. It will be such company for you afterwards—”

“Oh, yes; I’ve thought of that.”

“It will. Sometimes I wish my girl was little again. I want company so—”

Chickie said: “Well, Agnes Robbins, I may camp on with you years and a day and give you company—”

She began seriously to consider this, yet never quite sure of this colorful woman who gave her the feeling of a volcano, but half quiescent. Agnes Robbins had a very uncertain temper.

If the weather became hot, she grew angry. She banged the dishes down on the table; she let the biscuits burn. But she would bring cream to Chickie or get down a jar of preserves. Chickie understood this as her way of asking pardon.

Other little incidents pierced her. There was that trifle about Bertie Groom. This was a thin, white-faced boy of seven or eight and he was always hanging around the ranch. Agnes Robbins gave him cookies; she nagged at him and petted him. One day he got under her feet somehow as she was reaching over the stove. She brought herself erect with a jerk. She reached down and grabbed the boy and struck him violently in the face.

Chickie saw that from the porch. She turned away—sickened. A few moments later the little fellow was going down the road. Chickie followed. She reached down and put her arm on his shoulder, ready to cry that such a mite should suffer so. She said: “Don’t you care, Bertie.”

He shook off her arm: “Shucks— Don’t hurt me none! I like her—” He kept gulping. “She don’t mean nothing. She’s good to me most times. She just gave me these.” He showed Chickie a bag of nuts and raisins.

And Agnes was overcome with remorse. She justified herself: "Oh—the brat. Why doesn't Molly Groom keep him home! They kick him enough there—the poor, miserable little fellow—I'm sorry for him—"

She told Chickie then of Bertie Groom—and that Molly was lucky enough to be let stay on at home the way she was. Old Man Groom, her father, was a lazy, drunken sort but he had a heart. He had taken the girl and her child in and let them stay.

Chickie said suddenly: "I'm tired, I think I'll go to bed."

CHAPTER XCVIII

THE RUSE

THE month of her vacation was drawing to a close. Jonathan wrote a letter. It had a high, rollicking note. All the sentences ran merrily together, though at every two or three was a large and impressive period.

He told Chickie all the news of the block—Mary dropping in of an evening to keep them company; Martha Blake bringing a jar of chowchow she had made; an automobile sliding down the Twenty-first Street hill and the driver injured—

Then this paragraph sneaking in at the end: "Just you wait, Chickie girl! You won't know our old mansion since the artists started on it—one on the inside and one on the out. And what they've done to your room! But I won't tell you a word and don't ever let your mother know I've given you a hint. Mind now—"

Chickie read this letter walking along the white, dusty road. . . . October—but the sun was in her eyes. They blinked. She sat down suddenly on a little pile of dead hay. She covered her face with her hands.

That night, not mentioning the receipt of her father's letter, she wrote. She wrote in a feverish excitement, the pages lighted. Any one reading would fancy hers the gayest heart in the world. She told of a job offered her—secretary of a Northern California Farm Bureau and it was an undreamed-of opportunity and a perfect miracle that it should come to her. The Farm Bureau was to establish permanent offices in San Francisco and she would be located there with a salary of \$200 a month and a chance to work into a big executive position. She had all the qualifications so Mrs. Vale, secretary of the whole organization, told her. Mrs. Vale liked Chickie, even suggesting that she intended to retire and Chickie might then be ready for her place and her salary of \$350 a month. Of course she wasn't counting on that. But wasn't it thrilling that she should get a chance like this just now when she really

hated the work she had been doing. Oh, yes—she hated her old job—hated it and hated it! That's what made her so tired lately. Hadn't they noticed? Mitchell was a terrible crank. And then this salary—think of having \$60 a month extra!

Of course, she'd have to be stationed up here for a month or two till they had the San Francisco office ready—but then she would be traveling about from one county to another and all her expenses paid. Why—she'd have the most gorgeous time and would see the whole country—even the Sierras and Lake Tahoe and the giant redwoods—

So what did they think of that? Why she was just hopping with excitement over it and wouldn't they please write immediately! and say for her to grab it quick. She wanted it like anything, and she'd never get such a chance again. They knew how it was with opportunity and only knocking once! So hurry and say "yes—yes!"

She pictured the two of them reading that. She saw them raise proud eyes and smile—that Chickie of theirs—smart—well, was she! They wouldn't deny her—never stand in her way. She knew that. Then only a month or two and this brilliant future in her hands—

How well she read their hearts—simple hearts, easy to hurt; easier still to delight. Jonathan wrote—a bit formal this time, for it was an occasion of dignity.

"Chickie girl, your mother and I are pleased. We rejoice with you in this opportunity. But we want you to be cautious. Now, you have had four years and more of business experience, and you should be in a position to think and judge for yourself. We don't want you to be carried away with the thoughts of sight-seeing and traveling. We want you to remember that any one who receives \$200 a month must work hard for it. So we advise you to make careful inquiries; to weigh the matter well. Then, if you still believe this is a great opening, we are willing that you should take it.

"You'll not be so far away, even for these two months, so we'll expect you down over week-ends. Jennie and I are lonesome, so we count on this, but we don't want our feelings to interfere with a chance that may mean happiness for you. So you write at once and tell us. Most likely you'll come home for a few days before you take the job? If you don't, I'm afraid your mother will be downcast about it. She's got sur-

prises for you, Chickie girl. She wants you to see them. You remember what I hinted about, don't you?"

She cried reading that. She could see Jennie padding about her room, putting up new curtains, drawing them back with bright cords, standing aside, her head cocked, proudly surveying her work.

And when Chickie didn't return, Jennie would go again into the room. She would draw down the shades. There would come a hush—a darkness in the happy place that had been hers.

But she sent a blithe response:

"Old darlings—dearest old loves: I knew you'd let me have it! I want it so. It's even better than I thought. I signed up yesterday—a contract, you know—very formal. And I'm to begin work at once so I guess we can't have the visit for a while. But just as soon as ever I can I'm coming down. Oh—maybe you think I'm not just dying for a sight of you. I can't dare to think how much I want to hug you, Jonathan darling. Last night I dreamed that you and Jennie were standing at the bed and looking down at me. And you both kissed me again and again. You don't know how that made me feel. Honestly—when I woke up, my face was all wet—so I suppose I must have cried. But just the same this is a job that only comes once in a life and I never hoped for such a chance. So now I want to take it. It won't be so long up here—then think of the great times we can have on \$200 a month. Why, I'm going to buy a little automobile and we'll step some—us three—"

Yet, Jonathan in his answers, did not understand why she couldn't take a run down on a Saturday. She was driven and she wrote:

"What do you think, darling? Talk about luck and golden spoons. But here I've only been on the job a week and now they are going to send me along on an inspection tour of the mountains counties. Isn't that salubrious, though! I'll act as secretary and carry a little portable typewriter, but, oh—the fun—I'll see Shasta and mountings and rivers, and maybe snow—and, you know, I've never seen snow in all my life. Now don't write back melancholy, mother dear, because if you do it will take away all the joy. I'll only be gone six weeks or two months—well, about that long and all my life I'll have this richness to remember. It's wonderful to travel. You

ought to listen to Agnes Robbins. It makes me envious. And, then, I'm getting all my expenses and a salary besides. So there—and there!

"Keep sending the mail to Stockton, for this is the headquarters of the bureau. There won't be postoffices in many places that we go, but I'll write every single day, and when our reports go in to Stockton I'll send my letters. You may get them in a bunch from there, but you'll get them anyways—"

They accepted it. Jennie sent her a beautiful blue sweater and a scarf and woolen mittens. She'd need them—indeed, she would—going where there was snow.

Oh, the letters she had to write in the weeks after that—telling of things she had never seen—making up incidents.

And now it was November. One day Agnes Robbins said to her, "Is all your sewing done?"

"I have lots of time."

"Maybe not as much as you think."

She was somewhat insistent. "You ought to do a little. It will take your mind off things. You're lonely. Why, dearie, your eyes are red half the time. You cry too much. That's not fair, you know—"

Chickie laughed: "Oh—life isn't always fair—do you think? Did you find it so?"

But Agnes had Billy drive them in the farm car to town and they bought many things. After this, Chickie sewed. She took the things to her room and sat at the window. Often she pricked her fingers. They bled. Sometimes she would cry with impatience; other times she laughed at the hurt.

Then she would sit with folded hands and wonder with a terror at her heart. She would grow rigid in this fear.

The face of little Bertie Groom when Agnes had slapped him filed often before her mind. She might have a child like that—despised—Oh, no—No! She'd see to that!

But just how would she see to that!

One day she broached the matter to Agnes Robbins. She saw the woman's snapping black eyes narrow. It was but an instant's doubt that lighted them. It weighed on Chickie like a mountain. Oh, she wouldn't try that again—

Agnes might suspect—might ask her to go—

CHAPTER XCIX

JONATHAN'S SUMMONS

THEY wanted her home for Thanksgiving. They didn't know how they'd get through the day without her. Would she come?

Chickie packed a turkey that she herself had fed. She packed grapes and winter pears with many gay messages all in a holiday box.

She said to them: "Now what do you mean asking 'will I be home' and here I am millions of miles deep in the mountains and no chance to get back before the middle of December. But there's Christmas coming and just you wait—"

She told them how she would hang her stocking above the grate in the living room and she wanted it filled to bulging. And—oh—such things as she was making for them between times—Besides they knew in the very beginning that she would be on this inspection trip for two months—so hush now and have a Christmas tree all ready—

When she wrote letters like this to them, she felt as though she were twisting their hearts in her hand. For she could hear Jennie singing in the high, tender falsetto; she could see Jonathan square his massive shoulders. They'd believe—they'd wait—

Agnes Robbins taught her how to knit slippers and silk ties. So she began to make gifts for them. She tied them in green and red tissue paper. She bought a beautiful waist and sheer stockings for Jennie and gay handkerchiefs. Early in December she had an enormous box filled with treasures for the two of them.

At night she lay awake turning hotly from side to side. What would they do when she disappointed them again? What excuse must she make this time? She got up and sat at the window. The sky was black—it was quiet and dark. Her heart beat loud. And in the silence and the dark, horror of herself rose like a frightening shadow. It bore slowly upon her. It came close and put hands on her shoulders—breathed in her face; flashing red-hot images into her mind. They were

images of herself. She, sitting at a window, blithely flirting, thinking herself all stars and lilies; she standing in the stirrups; waiting till he kissed her twice; and she, that night of Bess Abbot's marriage, carried out on that deep tide of emotion whispering: "Did you wish it was to-night?"

Then other images—a canoe skimming down the river, darkness closing like a tomb, bleeding hands clinging to a cross beam.

Now this—now this.

But she kept writing the happy letters. She was in the mountains—odd people she met—nights that they stayed in the villages—days traveling to different settlements.

Two days before Christmas she rode into Stockton with Billy. She sent a telegram, not caring how the words ran:

"Darling Jonathan and Jennie—We're snowbound in this mountain village. Can't get out—can't hang my stocking. Make Christmas keep a week or two or I'll be broken hearted. We have everything here, but it's lonely. Jennie, dear, don't weep about it and I won't. I sent a Christmas box a week ago and hope you get it in time. When I get out of here all the jobs and salaries in the world won't fetch me back. I want to be home like anything. I'll be down mighty soon, and it will be for good."

She was afraid sending that. If they should trace it—if for one instant a suspicion leaped into their minds and they began to question. Or if Jonathan should show that message, say, to Jimmy, the whole flimsy pretext would be bared!

Now, looking back, she could see a hundred flaws in the moves she had made. Oh—she should have gone much farther away; should have put a thousand miles between her and the chance of return—the chance of discovery.

Christmas day she was awake early. It was cold. The cold bit into her flesh. She sat up in bed and could see her face in the mirror. There were black lines under her eyes—and a pinched look at her nostrils. She sank back under the covers and the feelings of strangeness, of not knowing this person that was now she, made her shiver.

Then she laughed: "Oh, no—not you! Somebody else! Not you at all!"

No rain—but the wind swept with a chill, dismal cry about the house. She pictured Jennie putting the turkey in the oven; Jonathan walking about restlessly—

She went with Wildie down to the river. The water was brown, heavy with mud; the trees stripped of their leaves had a bleak, desolate aspect. She touched the naked branches. She leaned against them.

Suddenly she began to cry and the dog whined. He jumped up and licked her face. She put her arms around him and cried more.

And she didn't try to calm herself—didn't fight against the outburst. She gave in to it, and finally sank down on the damp earth, mute—apathetic again.

She wondered vaguely if she deserved to suffer so—if it was right that she should be exiled here and not a chance in all the world to escape; not even a chance to meet the future. Oh—she had no idea what she was to do.

Others went free. She was the one to be branded. Marjorie Abbot could escape. Her baby was born dead. Janina wrote this bit of news with many caustic comments. Marjorie could have taken care of her child. She was married; she had money.

She—Chickie—could do nothing for hers. But it would live and she would live. The child would grow to hate her; to ask her how she dared to bring it here knowing what it must meet. Oh—the child would turn furiously against her—the child would be her judge.

Now, she imagined it a son, with a mouth that was full and sweet; forehead touched with glory, red hair brushed back. She was afraid of this image. When it confronted her she twisted her hands. If she had a son to look like him—to grow tall and question her with quiet, doubting eyes? She prayed that it would never be a son—

Then she fancied it a girl—the face like hers. She saw the bright thing standing before a mirror in a dress of green. She heard this girl laugh with joy finding herself so pretty; life so glad.

Chickie, seeing this, grew cold—grew utterly cold. She heard cries of anguish. They were her own. Oh, God—let it not be a girl—never a girl to suffer so—

The week after Christmas there came a letter from Mary. Mary wrote to her often and often there was a sting in her words. Like this one: "I dropped in on Christmas Day to see your mother, Chickie. She did nothing but talk of you and the wonderful job you had received—the big future and the big

salary. It's pathetic. She was talking her heart into the words. Well—the \$200 may be a good salary, but you're not the only one paying for it, Chickie. I think it's just cruel to your parents. If you're going to be down there much longer you better stop and think.

"I suppose I should mind my own business, but Jennie is looking very old and thin. She shows her age and she never did before.

"Jonathan didn't say a word the whole time I was there. He just chewed his cigar. Finally he asked me to come in for a while at dinner. We were eating at four so I could. It was the saddest thing in the world to see those two sitting there alone making a show of Christmas spirit with your place all decorated in holly, and Jennie wiping her eyes all the time. I don't know how you can do it, Chickie. It's selfish and nothing else when you know their whole life is centered in you."

And in the next mail there came a message from her father: "Chickie girl, it was no Christmas without you. Jennie is getting too lonely. She's not so well. I hope you'll come very soon. That's all she needs to perk up again. Poor mother—she dreams about you every night and wakes me up crying. Now that's all foolishness, I tell her—but just you hurry up, Chickie girl, or we'll come up and fetch you—"

She took these two letters and read them till terror like a poison filled her veins.

She sent no answers.

Time—she must fight for time. And now it seemed to her that her mind was paralyzed. When she tried to think it was numb—it was a frozen thing. She said to herself again and again—"Another month—another month—"

Then she was wild with fear that there might be delays—that this date for the end of January that the doctor had given her might be mistaken. She herself felt that it would be a week, or maybe two, later than that.

She wondered how soon she could get up—how soon she could race down there—free again—where she would put the little thing for just a while—

After New Year's she wrote. She had just come back. Oh, the time would be a jiffy now till she was with them again. Oh, they were clearing up all the work here and the office would soon be ready in the city. She'd have to wait—they were working day and night. But in a few weeks she'd come

flying in upon them. Wouldn't they make up for lost time, though.

Jonathan answered: "Come now, Chickie. Never mind about this job. Your mother is sick. She has been in bed almost since Christmas. She calls for you. I ask you to please put everything aside now and come."

CHAPTER C

JENNIE CALLS

CHICKIE took her father's letter and hid it under her pillow. When she slept, she dreamed of her mother. She saw her lying with half-closed eyes, the faded hair across her forehead. Jennie called and called: "Chickie here? Tell Chickie to come."

Those soft, gentle cries stabbed into her heart. They left a wound that spread. Each day it spread; it ate in frightful pain upon her.

But she let the time pass, ignoring Jonathan's plea. After four days she wrote:

"What do you mean the two of you, deserting your only darling. Almost ten days of the new year gone and I haven't heard one blessed word from either of you. Oh, you're not angry with me, are you? I wrote you after Christmas when I thought I was home for good, but they bounced me off again without a moment's notice and I've been all through the wilderness of Modoc county and couldn't get a word to you. Now I'm jaunting over the ruts and bowlders of Siskiyou's famous roads. Only the Lord himself could gouge such fancy twists. And the people—rustic—well, like a different race! I may write a book of my deep and delicious experiences and make you both famous, dear darlings—

"In two or three weeks I'll be completely finished. Then home! And Gulliver himself and all his travels will never lure me off again, I'm telling you—

"Now—write and write—or else I will go into exile and you'll never see the sweet face of Lucy Gray no more!"

These letters killed her spirit; they brought to death the sweetness in her. Oh—she wouldn't write another—not a single other! Let it happen—anything that would! Oh—she might as well take a hammer, pound out their trusting hearts.

Agnes Robbins noticed her red eyes. She made Chickie come into the kitchen where it was warm. They sat at a table near the window. Agnes poured coffee and stared at the

dreary, level acres. The wind swept dead leaves upward; and the leaves made little forlorn rushes and dropped along the ground. Agnes shivered: "What a God-forsaken place this is in winter! Merle [this was the name Chickie had given herself] dearie—what makes you want to stay up here?"

"I don't feel equal to moving. I like you, Agnes Robbins. And with my folks all in the East—it's better here than anywhere else could be—"

"Oh, dear! It gets me in the winter. I want to be away. I wish the place was sold. I can't stand this monotony. When I was young like you, Merle, the heavens couldn't chain me."

"Oh—some things could, I guess!"

"We must make the arrangements. You haven't much longer."

"They're all made. Didn't I tell you?"

"No—you'll go down into town, will you?"

Chickie nodded. But this was not the truth. She had been deliberately vague with Agnes Robbins as to the date, setting it later than the time the doctor had named.

She did this because she was stubborn and determined to remain on the ranch. She was afraid to be sent from it. In the town was a hospital. The doctor had come from the city. His nurses were all brought from San Francisco. Chickie had trembled during the whole time she talked to him, fearing a door might open and some one she knew would appear. Oh—she'd run into the fields before she'd take such a chance now!

Then Jonathan wrote again: "Well, we didn't know what to make of it, Chickie girl, when you didn't come and didn't write. And your mother cried by the hour and that's not good for her. She's not a bit well, though I don't want to frighten you. I've had the doctor and he thinks it's a touch of pneumonia and her heart's none too strong. Please ask them to give you a little time off, Chickie girl, and run down here to see us. Jennie is in bed and I can lift her now like a baby. She's gotten thin. Chickie, your old Dad would find it mighty sweet to have you here in these night times—and sitting by the bed. What shall I tell your mother—that you're coming as soon as the train will bring you? Write at once—"

This, too, went under the pillow. Chickie knelt at the bed, her face buried in her arms. And she cried. And she thought that God was hard to her.

Doubly hard. Because Jonathan had sent another letter,

enclosing it with his. It was from Barry Dunne. He sent her money. He wrote this:

"I know you don't wish to hear from me. I don't send this to you. But the time must be about over. I can't endure the thought that it should suffer because of me. It will suffer no matter what is done now but you haven't the right, because of contempt for me, to make it any harder for it. I will send more regularly if you let me know."

No name signed—no greeting given. If anything on the green, sad earth could make her feel more alone, more desolate, it was that line from him she had so loved—

She took a plain envelope and put the bills—\$250—in this and sealed it. Then she put it in her trunk and trembled. The child was his—his too—the pain all hers—

She walked into the room, holding his letter in her hand, feeling it like a scalding in her mind. Suddenly she laughed. Ho—free—she had been free—ever so free. She had been glad—oh, joyous days on a river—oh, happy, long hours under a tree. And she had laughed—daring life to corner her!

Life had taken her dare. But not Janina's—not Amy Heaton's—not even Marjorie Abbot's.

But if they could eat their fruit as she was eating hers. Oh, if they could taste the ashen bitterness. She stopped, exhausted.

Jonathan's letter remained unanswered two days. Then came another. Swift, commanding, frantic in its prayer:

"Chickie, girl, come now! Jennie is sinking. Leave everything and come. Your mother is out of her mind, calling for you. She's taken this sudden turn. Pray God to help us. I don't know what to do or what to say to her. Send me a telegram. Don't waste a moment."

And Chickie, shaken from head to foot, crept up the steps to her room. She closed the door, locked it. Then she raced into the closet, pulled down her coat, pulled down a black silk cape. Oh, she would go—rush down to them—brazen it out—fling her arms about Jennie's neck, whisper and see the dear, faded eyes grow bright again.

She pulled on the cape and stood before the mirror, her eyes dilated—almost a madness lighting them. She draped the cape boldly, flung her head up!

Her face grew leaden even watching it, and the coldness of her hands went into her blood. Go down to little Jennie—

rush in on her—kill her with a glance—bow Jonathan in anguish! Oh, yes! Go home like this—their pretty angel come to them as such. Oh—break their hearts and walk on them!

Better that Jennie go from her in peace; better that Jennie pass, thinking her sweet, thinking her so white and dear—

Chickie leaned against the mirror. She pressed her face against the glass. She whispered: "God, let me die! Oh—if there is a God—let me die!"

She called up her friend, the telephone operator at the hotel, asking her to send this wire:

"Jonathan, darling—don't let Jennie sink! I'm coming! The very quickest I can. I won't lose a minute. But the travel is slow on these mountain roads. Oh—if you let her sink I'll never get over it! I may be delayed because I have a terribly sprained ankle, and I can't walk on it. Wire me if she gets any worse."

A week passed. There was no further word. Of course—why, he thought she was on her way to them—he thought his letters wouldn't reach her—

Time went with slothful feet. It trampled heavily upon her.

A week longer—oh—she had but a week longer—if only it might come on time—that little—that very little could be granted her!

Even as she asked for this, Dorothy Wreden phoned from the hotel. She had a telegram.

"Jennie is dying. Chickie—what keeps you? You may not see your mother again. Come now or you will be too late. Hire machines—but get here!"

Chickie ran into the field. She went down to the river, the dog bounding at her side. She caught his head and rocked it wildly in her hands. Tears were flames on her face. She said: "I'm killing her—mother—Oh, God—"

She leaned her back against a tree—mistletoe trailed in her hair. She kept saying—"God! God!" And she ran up and down. She flung herself against the earth. Wildie licked the wetness from her face.

That night the child was born.

CHAPTER CI

CHICKIE'S WIRE

SHE lay on the pillows, her eyes closed. And she didn't look at the child and didn't want it in her arms. She lay there. Knives, sharp and flashing, went piercing through her brain. Her brain said to her: "She's dead—you'll never see her now—never. You wouldn't go—would you—"

She saw her mother with the plump, gentle hands crossed on her breast. They were cold hands, and Jennie's face was still. She had failed them. She was the one who had caused all this. Now Jonathan was alone—a stricken soul and robbed of all he had—even of her—his golden child.

Chickie turned. She murmured: "Mother—oh, Jennie!"

Then Agnes Robbins came and put the baby in her arms. "A little girl, Merle. Pretty—look at it—"

A girl—but she didn't want a girl to stand so blithely at a mirror; to laugh a high clear laugh because her heart was gay. Oh—at the last she prayed and prayed that it would be a son. So easy for a man!

Agnes smoothed the covers. "Look at it, Merle—"

Then Chickie did. A moan quivered from the depths of aching memory. Hair—the baby had hair, his hair—a red-gold floss curling tight and thick over the small head. Chickie had never seen hair on a baby before. Lucy's children and Mary's were all bald.

She lowered her head that Agnes might not see her chin; her lips that twisted so. Then she touched the baby's hair—lightly ran her fingers over it. She wept and brought the tiny face into the cradle of her arm—in a great pity—in a sheltering loyalty. She said, "Poor little thing—oh—poor little thing." Hers—only hers—she leaned down and kissed its forehead.

It lay so quiet. It opened its eyes and seemed to look right at her. Then its eyes were closed; the little weazened face unmoved.

She heard Agnes speaking to the doctor. She held her

breath in fear. Agnes said: "You'll take her to the hospital now, doctor?"

"Better not." She caught a word here and there—"Weak—I wouldn't take the risk—"

A momentary gladness filled her. Safe—oh, she was safe here. The mad pain she had endured was not in vain. She had locked the door of her room, ground her hands together, wondering with each new, tearing shock that any one could suffer so and live. Only when her senses seemed leaving her, when the wildness of torment was splitting her body in two, had she called Agnes. When the doctor arrived the baby was born—here, on the ranch—as she had so fervently determined.

And they wouldn't move her now—too weak.

Agnes went quietly about the room. She took the baby and put it in a basket, leaning down and for a long while searching its face. Agnes shook her head—an almost imperceptible movement. Chickie saw this distantly as in another world.

Then she slept. She had a dream. Some one stood at a door. It was he. Then he came over and knelt at the bed. He took her hand and kissed it. She felt his lips along her arm. He was saying something. He seemed to be crying, and she had to lean over to catch the words. They were these: "Chickie—ah—you thought I wouldn't come—you thought that, Chickie? You were blaming me. But I didn't know."

She answered with a faint laugh: "Oh—they told me you were married—"

But he stooped down then and raised her in his arms. She noticed for the first time that he held the child and her—both of them—

She awakened—shaking—mumbling. The baskets of Wandering Jew hung from the beams. She stared at these. Then she saw the makeshift cradle and gave a sharp, tortured cry.

Emily Faris, the stout, gossipy woman who had come from a neighboring ranch to act as nurse, hurried to the bed. She brought a cup and said to Chickie: "Drink this, girly—you'll feel better."

Chickie said: "Where is Agnes Robbins?"

"Sleeping."

And Mrs. Faris carried the baby and laid it at her side, saying curiously: "See if it will nurse."

Chickie stared at her, bewildered. Again that shiver of aversion seized her. Ho! What a monstrous thing to ask—

incredible word to say to her. And this little, quiet thing with its shut eyes and its floss of ruddy hair, lying in her arms—hers—it was hers. She had a child!

When she felt its lips against her flesh—soft, feeble things, the pity touched her. She couldn't help but put her fingers on the bright ringlets.

Mrs. Faris said: "It has lovely hair—if it stays that way—"

Chickie answered: "It lies so quiet. It must be asleep."

"No—but it's weak—it's a weak little thing—don't bother—it won't nurse. It doesn't need anything for a day or so—" She put it back in the basket and began to talk in a monotonous, ambling way. Her children were such strapping infants. They were lively from the start. This little one was a delicate mite—of course it might thrive—it might get along—

She kept on like that. Chickie said: "What time is it?"

"Five o'clock—"

Five hours till the mail came. Would there be another message. Suddenly Chickie asked: "Can I get up to-morrow?"

"No—indeed! Though there are some that do. I never took more than four days at my worst. Then I was about, sound as a nut."

Chickie turned her face—pretended to sleep. She said again and again to her thought, "A little girl—mine—oh—" Each time her thought shuddered. Then she said, "The fourth day—wait that long—"

Finally she slept. Now she had another dream. It was of her father. He was opening a window—flinging it wide. He was shouting: "Chickie—come—!" And she was running. But she had no breath to answer. When finally the words did reach her lips, the window was banged down . . . a shadow, massive and black, heaped behind it. And the shadow was Jonathan. He too was dead—

Agnes Robbins bent over her; and now a wintry sun was in the room.

"Dearie—you're all right. The baby is all right."

Chickie began to cry. She pressed her face in the pillows. Agnes stroked her hair. "Don't cry, dearie."

"It seems so strange. Oh—I wish my mother was here—"

"Yes—yes—"

"Did any mail come for me?"

"None—"

Then Agnes too brought over the child. All day they

seemed to be doing this. It lay still and didn't cry. It seemed to sleep. The more she looked at it, the more she pitied it.

Once when she was alone in the room she raised it so that its tiny face was close against her neck and she whispered, "Oh—ho—"

She held it like this a long while. Then she stared at its face. And she was wondering what this little thing would say—oh, some day when it learned to know—how would it look at her. She brought its lips to hers and kissed them.

Mrs. Faris urged her to sleep. She wouldn't. She was afraid of her dreams.

On the third day she asked Agnes to phone to the Stockton Hotel and ask Dorothy Wreden if there was a telegram for Mrs. Clayton. But there was none.

This silence appalled her. It was like the touch of death. And she got up and stood at the bed. She said to herself: "I'm strong—I feel all right!" Perspiration stood on her forehead. They came in and made her get back and lie quietly.

Agnes said: "You must keep your strength for the little one. She'll need it."

For the baby was quiet—all day it lay with its eyes shut—and it scarcely nursed at all. Chickie had the basket brought near the bed. She spent the time looking at it. She liked to touch its hair.

A strange fancy had taken possession of her. She had an idea that she took the baby home and no one was surprised. And Jonathan raised it in his great arms and chuckled. She thought this as she looked at it. Why—oh, they might. The tenderness in her grew. Poor little thing—like she was—alone— And she wanted to guard it—save it—

The fourth day she said to Agnes Robbins: "I want to sit up." She insisted. So they let her.

She said: "I feel wonderful. Did any mail come for me?"

None.

In the afternoon Billy brought a message from Old Lady Arlett. She was dying. Some one ought to go and be with her.

Because Chickie seemed so well, Agnes went. She would stay till the poor, lone soul passed.

The moment she was gone Chickie said to Mrs. Faris: "I'd like a little chicken. Will you fry me some?"

When the woman was in the kitchen Chickie stole to the phone. But a strange voice answered her. Dorothy Wreden was off for the afternoon.

Chickie said in a muffled voice: "Is there any message for Mrs. John Clayton?"

"No."

"I expected a telegram. Perhaps you have one for Helena Bryce?"

"Oh, yes—I didn't know where to send it. One came a few hours ago."

And the girl read to her: "Mother will not last through the night. In God's name, hurry. Jonathan."

She said to the girl: "Send an answer to that. Say: 'Coming. I'll be there to-night. Chickie.'"

CHAPTER CII

THE FLIGHT

SHE looked into the baby's basket. It was the one distinct, quiet thing in a room growing dim, swaying as with fogs. They rose in a heaving sea; they stole the breath from her.

"Hurry! In God's name, hurry!"

But she didn't think; she saw—pictures flying through her mind. Jonathan shouting at the open window, and she, running and running. The window banged down and that awful shadow heaped against it. Jennie crying softly: "Chickie—oh, come!"

But her hand touched the baby's fingers—oh, such delicate, pointed things, and the nails were a work of art. It didn't stir—little, unprotesting creature. Suddenly Chickie saw Bertie Groom and the welt on the frightened, soft cheek. She shivered. No—oh, no—a tiny thing to suffer so—

She leaned down, whispering to it and to herself. "I won't. No—I couldn't! I never could!" Her tears fell on the baby's blanket—she kept wiping them and trembling.

She raised the baby! Ho! Jennie would be glad. Jennie was so warm; such a plump, kindly breast—lay the baby there—put it in her mother's arms!

Suddenly she saw Jennie's elbow cradling the child; heard Jennie's high falsetto crooning to it. A great softness like music played in her thoughts.

Do that—go—take the baby with her—give it to them.

She wiped the heat from her neck, but the throbbing at her throat quickened—it beat wildly.

She began pulling things from drawers, shoving them in her trunk—letters, clothes, books. She snapped down the cover and locked it. She said quietly, "Get there to-night."

Emily Faris came into the room with the chicken. Even in the hallway she began to talk: "Now you'll feel strong as a lion after this—melt in your mouth. When I was down with Clemcy—she's my fourth—"

Chickie said: "Did Billy come back with the car?"

"Land sakes, no! He's gone on to see Ryerson about the bean money. He won't be along till late."

Chickie said to her thought: "I'll have to walk—not far." She could scarcely breathe. She made a hasty shift in her plans. Now she would have to send Mrs. Faris away—the woman wouldn't let her walk to the train. She said to her: "Didn't you say you needed some clothes?"

"Oh, there's no great hurry, Mrs. Clayton. I can go over to-morrow and get them. Out here in the wilderness we don't fuss like city folks do. Of course—"

"But you might as well go now. I feel fine, and there's a little sun to-day. Go while it's fair."

"Well, if you don't mind—it won't take me long. Do you think you'll be all right for an hour?"

"Why, yes—I'm perfectly fine to-day. Take your time. You needn't come till six."

From the window Chickie saw the stout, short figure and the wind ballooning the wide skirts. Mrs. Faris seemed to be driven along, the wind was so stiff.

Chickie was alone. For a moment unable to move because of the excitement: of the hush and the fears.

She wrote a note:

"DEAR AGNES ROBBINS:

"My mother is dying. I just got word from my father of a horrible automobile accident. She isn't expected to live through the night. They were on their way here from the East to surprise me. This morning in San Francisco another machine crashed into them. I must go. I can't wait here. Forgive me for this haste but you can understand. I intended asking Billy to drive me to the train but he's away. I was afraid Mrs. Faris would try to stop me from walking so I sent her home. Dear Agnes Robbins, you've been an angel to me and I shall never forget all your kindness. Don't be angry with me now. What else can I do? I'm enclosing the money I owe you, also enough to cover the charges for telegrams I've sent. I'll have a man call for my trunk. I'm only taking a very few of the baby's things with me. A thousand thanks to you, dear Agnes.

"MERLE CLAYTON."

She pinned this envelope on the basket where the baby lay.



A First National Picture.

IN THE NICK OF TIME CHICKIE DIVERTED HIS AIM.

"Chickie."

She dressed—mumbling to herself, dropping her skirt, half sobbing all the time: “Hurry—oh, God—hurry—” She kept seeing Jennie—panting—calling—and Jonathan lumbering to the door, straining his eyes up and down the block—oh, wondering why she wouldn’t come—

She took a blanket and wrapped the baby in it; laid it on her bed, staring mutely at its quiet face, touching its hair. She fancied that it smiled at her.

Then she raised it swiftly, its cheek against her neck, half hidden in the straggly fur of her coat. She crept down the stairs, then through the empty kitchen. And, lowering her head as one breasting a storm, she passed through the oaks to the river road. Going to them—taking the baby with her. The wind drove; the leaves circled. And she hurried.

A mile and a half to the train. The train due in an hour. Oh, she could walk that easily. In four hours she would kneel at Jennie’s bed.

Jennie’s sweet hand running over her hair again; Jennie’s dear, faded eyes brimming. Oh—her mother would know—know her the very moment. She went hurling along, her lips moving in fever—a frantic thing.

It took so long to get from tree to tree. They seemed to move away. The wind tore at her hat. Hurry—quicker. But her feet were leaden—she drew short, hard breaths.

And she sank down a moment, resting. She drew her coat tighter—oh, it was cold. She held the baby close.

As she did this there was a twisting in her mind—a chill voice that said: “Taking it to Jennie—lay it in Jennie’s arms!” She got to her feet—shaking. Every pulse was shaking with a stark vision of herself ringing the bell of the yellow cottage, smiling at Jonathan, walking into the hall. And a baby in her arms!

She sat down again on a mound of earth. She opened the collar of her coat—hot now. The wintry sun was hot—or her blood was fire.

Insane—was she insane? Imagine little Jennie and the horror in their hearts seeing their Chickie—and all this—and the hiding and the lies—and neighbors peeking behind the shades—oh—

She sat motionless and numb. The baby lying on her knees. She put her hand on its face. Its lips were blue, chilly. Poor little thing—so quiet. Keep it warm. She opened her coat

and laid its face against her breast—a fainting weakness in her thoughts.

She said, "I can't do that—or kill them—" Stealing away from them to keep it all so hushed—never let Jonathan know—never. And now to rush back blindly—shout it to the world—

An idea flashed upon her. She wondered why she hadn't thought of this before. She would go to Dorothy Wreden in Stockton. Dorothy would tell her of some kind, efficient nurse. And she would pay her well—pay her enormously to keep the baby—oh—just for a while—just till she could think—just till she could know the thing to do—

Yes—do that—then rush away—then rush to them. Make them smile. Oh—never crush their hearts. Her anguish this—bear it by herself—brave it alone—

She felt stronger. She began to hurry. She drew her coat because the baby's face was cold. She ran. A faint shiver stirred the tiny form. She looked at it—its lips twitched—a little, flickering movement. It startled her. And she stooped down with her cheek against its mouth, waiting for the warmth of its breath.

But the wind blew—ruffian gusts. She felt no warmth—no breath. She touched the baby's eyes—she rubbed the baby's hands—she shook it—oh, its mouth curving—parting. Then a stillness—stillness than before—

Chickie stared at its shut eyes—its open mouth. A mortal fright crossed into her heart—made it heavy like a stone. She laid the baby on the ground, knelt beside it, listened for its breath. She raised it and whispered to it. She said wildly. "It's all right—weak—it's just the same!"

And she began to run with it. She kept running—afraid to look—afraid to stop.

But she felt under the blanket for its hands and they too were cold. She cried: "Oh—no—no—" And looked at it—and it was still—utterly still—

CHAPTER CIII

RELEASED

CHICKIE closed her eyes, the little cold face pressed against her own. The wind swept them—it went into her soul and laid it desolate.

There was no sun—no light—no pallid hills upreaching to the sky. Nothing but wind and death and this too-awful pain.

She wound her arms about the tiny form. She said, imploring: "It's just the same—just the same—" But, praying this, her thought shook with fear.

She listened for its heart, fancied she heard a wavering pulse. She took a breath, warming it and blew this in the baby's mouth. She could be sure, then, that its eyelids quivered.

But they did—did they? Oh, answer that, some one. And she put the chill face back against her own, went on and on, steadying herself against the trees, stumbling, getting up. Hurry—keep it warm—keep the breath there.

For she was afraid of the little shut eyes—afraid of the coldness that stole through her veins.

She wasn't going to Stockton now, nor to Jennie—not yet. She was going to the town—get on the train—take it to the doctor—oh, make him smile and say, "It's all right—weak, of course—"

A far distant whistle. That was the train coming. Its whistle shivered along her nerves; it drew her up rigid and sharp; it made a thundering in her mind. Suddenly she began to cry. Suddenly she said, "Oh, it's dead."

Holding it so close, she felt her feet sinking—a gentle sinking—going down and down; the trees wavering, slipping away; a darkness closing. No wind now, and no chill, nor any thought at all.

A moment's void, like an eternity. Then a warmth in her face; a chiding, triumphant whine. Wildie was at her side, licking her eyes.

She caught his neck: "Oh, dog—how did you come?" She

pulled herself upward. She said, "Hurry, Wildie! Run!" And held to his neck—tumbling along like that.

The train whistled closer. Just around the turn. It was there—almost there.

The dog cast a puzzled, searching glance in her face; he sniffed at the bundle in her arms, but he trotted close at her side, letting her hand pull roughly at his scruff. Oh—she blessed him—thanks for the dog—

Now the engine's great black nose swept into view. She raised her purse, flagged the train. Some one lifted her on—some one helped her to a seat, saying kindly: "Sick, ma'am? Baby sick?"

She nodded. She raised the blanket gently, shielding the tiny, moveless face.

On the train now—rushing. But Jennie too, would be gone. Chickie thought with a broken despair: "She won't live, either—I can't get there now—" She fancied Jonathan, his head bowed in his arms—But she didn't cry. She only ran her fingers along the baby's neck.

A faint moisture trickled from its lips. It brought a courage to her thoughts. Oh—she was a wild thing to suppose it dead—only sleeping—a stupor perhaps, but alive.

So she brought it to the doctor.

Seeing her, a sharp admonition sprang to his lips: "Out! What do you mean, Mrs. Clayton?"

"The baby—look—" She opened the blanket.

He glanced at the child soberly, took it and laid it on the table. He asked simply: "When did it die?"

"Ho—dead! Ho—it's not dead?"

"Yes."

She clenched the table, turning her head away, biting her lips. Then she asked faintly: "Are you sure? I thought it moved—"

"It didn't move."

But she went up to it then, touched its lips, stooping down, laid her face against it. And cried and couldn't stop the tears. Oh—such a little forlorn thing—never to have cried—scarcely to have stirred. Now it was gone—bleakly—like this—

But the doctor said: "It's better so, Mrs. Clayton. It had no strength—none at all."

She twisted her hands, staring at them, "Did the cold kill it? Did the wind—perhaps—"

"The cold didn't kill it. I didn't expect it to last this long. But the cold can hurt you. Why did you come? Why didn't you send for me? This is bad."

She told him—and as she spoke she saw Jennie and her father. She was beside herself and mumbled: "Oh, I'll be too late—Oh, I'd rather die than—She wants me so—"

She said that she had started for the city, but on the way the baby got so chilled it frightened her—

"But this is madness, Mrs. Clayton. You take your life in your hands."

She answered helplessly: "My mother will be dead—Oh—I'm going—I have to go. Oh—what am I to do?"

She went back to the dead baby, stared at it, fingered the red-gold curls. "Can it wait till I come back—?"

"Why, Mrs. Clayton? You can't do anything for the baby now. And if you're going to South America—you said that, didn't you—will you want to take the body all that distance?"

No—she didn't even know when she would be leaving for that long trip now. She kept saying: "My mother will be dead. She can't live through the night."

She went up to the doctor and clenched his arm. She said: "I have to go. You don't know, doctor. I'm the only one they have. It will break my father's heart. Oh—can't you do something—can't you take care of the baby here for me? Keep it or something—"

Robert Emerson was a big man with a large, intelligent face and fine sharp eyes. He said quietly: "It could be buried here. Yes—you could do that. Do you want that, Mrs. Clayton? Of course, we could attend to that—an infant's burial is simple—"

She began to cry. Leave it—poor little thing—such a cold, lonely way to do. She wanted it laid away kindly. It should have flowers and a little white robe. And some one should go with it—she wanted to know where it would rest.

Well—a nurse could handle it.

She wanted it named—"Merle Clayton"—and a stone or a little granite cross. And she would return soon—oh, the moment that she could—

The nurse came in. She held Chickie's hand and said she'd

dress it herself—she'd get a wreath of little pink roses or lilies of the valley. Chickie cried.

She said faintly: "Oh—everything as pretty as you can—"

The doctor clasped her hand: "I hope you won't suffer from this, Mrs. Clayton. I warn you against it."

She looked into his kind face. She said: "If your mother was dying—"

"Yes—I know—my mother died in such a way. I trust yours will live."

Chickie opened the purse where all her money was—her own—that she had earned and not the envelope with the bills that Barry Dunne had sent.

She said: "I want it nice. How much will it take?"

"A hundred dollars, I should think about that."

"But for the stone, too. Oh, I want that! I want to come up here and look at it.

So she left them \$150. That was a great deal for her. There remained \$300 of all she had saved in her four and a half years of working.

But she gave to it far more than money—gave it the blithe, singing heart; the high joy that had been hers.

She was free now—free again. She could go to them. She stood a moment and her fingers loitered on the silken hair; her tears fell on the weazened, quiet little face. It seemed a pretty thing to her—a perfect little thing. She kissed it. She went away.

And where her pity for it had been and the loyalty she had felt was now an emptiness—and now a dread—

CHAPTER CIV

HOMECOMING

STRANGE to shut a door and leave behind it, finished and cold, the anguish of the past.

Chickie wept, doing that.

It was over—the waiting; the fearing. And she had a little dead child with red-gold hair. They would put a monument on its grave. She wanted that.

Going back now; back to those two waiting so long. In four hours Jonathan would wrap his arms about her, raise her face in his hands. Oh—he would hold her so.

She cried softly. Now it was for Jennie and that Jennie might be gone; the blue, dear eyes closed. Now it was for herself and that she had to treat them so. Oh—Mary said she was a selfish thing and what she did was cruel; thinking of herself—not at all of them that loved her so; leaving them so sad on Christmas Day.

But if Mary could have really known these months; the hour just passed. If Mary had to close a door like that, or if she had carried her little son all cold against her neck? Chickie had to do it. Had to.

She sank against the red plush cushions. The hum-hum of the wheels at the rails drummed monotonously on her nerves. It was like the wearing and ache of her flesh. She was glad for the weakness; it was a drug lulling her senses; making her thoughts and her fears drift vaguely. It gave her respite from herself.

She watched the dust along the road blown in high dreary circles; trees bowing before the wind—dimly in the gathering darkness. Going on and on—going back.

Sleep came upon her—troubled. Jonathan opened the door. His hands touching hers were ice. He didn't take her in his arms. He stood there with his chin doubled, his lips tight. He kept shaking his head. And she knew. All for nothing—too late—

But again she dreamed that as the door opened Jennie

came pattering. She wiped her eyes on the corner of her snowy apron; gave her sly laugh. She said: "Home, Chickie, dear! You thought I was dying? Oh—I was only lonely. We wanted you back! We made believe—" But as she said this, Chickie took something from under her coat and put it in Jennie's hands. It was the baby, and it was alive. Jennie's face grew ashen, her mouth opened. She seemed to totter, to shrink. Then the hall was dark. Jennie wasn't there. Chickie was alone, leaning against the living room door. The house was filled with moaning.

She awakened, moist with alarm, glanced about her nervously. Across the aisle a woman with a large, florid face and black, straight hair dozed. She had a double chin—her mouth was open. There was no other passenger in this end of the train.

It was eight o'clock—a few moments from the boat. Less than an hour now—home again.

On the boat Chickie went into the dressing room. She bathed her face, held the cold water to her eyes. She combed her hair. They would see her thin—see the dark circles and the faint lines about the winsome mouth. Oh—but all of that was for Jennie. She had worried so—

The rush and scramble at the ferry building bewildered her—boys shouting their extras, men dashing for the boats, automobiles honking and the stream of restless humanity pouring and whirling. She held fast to Wildie's leash. A man screamed, "Taxi, lady, taxi" at her ear. She nodded and followed. She said to him, "Fair Oaks, quickly!"

And her heart stood still because they went so fast. She was afraid of the word that waited—that she would hear so soon, now. She kept pressing her hands; kept talking to the dog: "Going home, Wildie—you and me!"

The cloistered street was dark. It breathed heavily under its canopy of silence. She strained her eyes against the window; she winked the tears back.

Then the little yellow cottage—oh—white now—all white and clambered up with roses—red roses. Why, she'd never know the place! White shades in the living room and lights there—many lights. The driver helped her out—helped her to the steps. And she paused, breathless on the old post. Why were the lights so bright there? Why was that?

The front door opened softly—a deep, muffled cry: "Chickie!

Chickie girl!" Jonathan like a boy, bounding down the steps, half lifting her in his arms, carrying her.

Then she saw his face—haggard—and worn. She closed her eyes. She whispered: "Jennie? Jennie—"

"Ah, God, Chickie!"

"Oh, Jonathan—quick—tell me—"

He said—"Come—"

Half fainting she followed, clinging to his arm. Half blindly she went into their room, reached the bed, dropping on her knees. Jennie lay there.

Jonathan stooped down and whispered in her ears: "Mother—she's here—mother—"

Jennie didn't stir—Chickie heard a faint, gasping breath. She looked and saw the plump, gentle face white, thin—the nostrils pinched.

Oh—but she was there! She was alive—she was left to them. Chickie reached for the wasted hands, brought them to her lips. And Jonathan said, with a chuckle in his murmuring voice, "Jennie! Your Chickie! Jennie—she's come!"

The pale lips opened, a flicker of joy, a faint "Chickie?" Jennie turned—saw her—ah—smiled. Chickie buried her face against her mother's arms and cried because of the look in Jennie's eyes—and cried because her heart was broken so. Oh, Jennie looked at her as though it were an angel come to visit her—as though it were the sweetness of heaven opening.

And Jennie raised her hand a little. She touched Chickie's hair.

Jonathan came over then and lifted Chickie in his arms and pressed her against his shoulder, sobbing and holding her so tight.

She said: "Jonathan—she's all right—Jennie's all right—"

His chin doubled as it had in her dream. He shook his head.

"I don't know—I don't know—pray God!"

But Chickie answered, "She is! She is!"

She clung to her mother's hand—held her—death should not win—oh, there's been enough—enough—

She sat there through the night and knew no pain of her own. She looked across to Jonathan and smiled. He came over and kissed her—raised her face in his hands, saying again and again: "Chickie girl—Chickie—"

Once Jennie heard that—opened her eyes wide, smiled. She said, clearly, "I knew she'd come."

"Mother—you know me—I'm here—" Chickie smoothed the hair from Jennie's wide forehead—she leaned down and kissed it gently. Tears were at the corner of Jennie's eyes.

Oh—the peace of these nights and days! Oh—the shelter and the quiet of Jonathan's arms—the benediction of Jennie's smile.

Die—not now—and Chickie here. Her coming wrought the miracle.

Jonathan met her in the hall one morning that first week. She was bringing gruel to her mother. Jonathan cried. He said: "Thank God for you, Chickie girl—you saved her."

Chickie turned her face away.

Another time at breakfast, Jonathan got up swiftly, put his arms on Chickie's shoulders, staring in her eyes. A startled, frightened look crossed his mouth.

"Chickie—you're sick—Chickie—don't you feel well?"

"Of course, of course!"

But he touched her cheeks—he ran his hand under her chin. He said abruptly: "You must rest—rest, Chickie. Can't have you sick now."

She laughed: "Oh, Jonathan—I feel so well—I feel—oh, you don't know—but as if everything is right again—"

She sat all day with Jennie. Sometimes they talked. Sometimes her mother lay quiet. But a smile on her lips.

She wanted Chickie near the bed. She kept saying: "Chickie—will you go again? Are you going back?"

"Mother—no—no—not for all the jobs in the world."

"You mean it, Chickie? You'll stay now—"

"Yes—yes—oh, I will—"

When she was alone in her own room she knelt at her bed. She prayed. "Let me stay—let me have this—oh, God—"

And she wouldn't think—she held her mind closed against the past. Oh—blot it out—oh, cling to these two who needed her and wanted her—only that—and never let them know.

CHAPTER CV

CONVALESCENCE

THE low chair by Jennie's bed became a sanctuary. Chickie's spirit knelt there. Holding fast to Jennie's wasted hand, she whispered in the dark and the silence, sending out wistful, pathetic prayers as though God were listening, leaning down to hear—

And if Life had come then with brimming arms, Chickie would have turned away. She would have begged: "Oh, Life, forget me! Let me be. Give me nothing—nothing ever but this, just this: To stay on here—"

Once, praying so, she was suddenly back on the river road, stumbling through naked oaks, and the baby lay cold against her breast. She murmured brokenly, not knowing. Jennie stirred—after a moment asked vaguely: "Chickie, are you crying?"

"Oh, no, mother. Why should I cry?"

But tears were hot on her cheeks; her heart a twisted, aching thing. She fancied the baby cradled in Jennie's arms; fancied that Jennie smiled and touched its hair.

Another time, dozing a little, she dreamed of returning to the town, looking for the grave. She couldn't find it. No stone. She wished to ask the nurse. A man passed, pointing at something, then at her. Another passed, who also pointed. Then many came—dozens—hundreds. They began to shout: "It's there, can't you see? There!" A frantic terror seized her. She looked from one to another. Her knees grew weak. She sank—sank—

Something cold touched her neck. Warm hands rubbed hers. Martha Blake stooped above her. Chickie sat up, too frightened to speak. She caught Martha's sleeve in bewilderment. Martha smiled and said: "Chickie, fainting! Now you get to bed, Miss! And don't get up till I call you in the morning. Jennie is all right."

"She needs me!"

"Then save your strength. Why, you're as white and

pinched. You can't overdo yourself like this. Jonathan and I can manage."

Martha brought her a glass of warm milk. Chickie thought her eyes were searching. She wondered if she had spoken in her dream. Oh—it was bitter, having such pictures in her mind—sitting on that mound of earth, the dead baby on her knees and she, blowing the pitiful breath in its mouth.

Yet she was grateful for the suspense and the tightness of these watching days—even glad that Jennie lay so quiet, needing her. It gave her strength, gave her calm. She could even smile when Mary came. For now her fight was done, all stilled the song and tumult. She was pouring out her youth—what youth was left her—into Jennie's veins. And they three—she and the two old beloved ones—would go along the road together—always.

Jennie would be better soon, be rosy and plump again. Sometimes, hearing the short, gaspy breath, seeing the nostrils almost transparent now and dilating, she grew afraid. She stared at her mother's thin, drawn lips.

"Why is she still so weak?" she asked the doctor.

"Weak? My dear girl, be thankful. It's well you came when you did. You did what I couldn't—you gave her the will to live."

It was a blessing for both of them—the slow convalescence. It brought them close. They had never been so near. Chickie combed her mother's hair, bathed her, tied ribbons to the long sleeves of her nightgowns. As she did this she murmured odd, gentle, yearning things that brought tears to the gentle eyes. Then Chickie would laugh: "Ho, weep for yourself, ole dear! You're better! See—the frills—I make you so very otherwise, mother, darling—"

Jennie gave her looks that tore the heart they were so full of faith, so pierced with love. Once she said: "Chickie, I didn't know you cared so much—"

"Oh, mother—but now? Why, did you really think I liked being away. I all but died being held down there in those awful mountains. It was pretty terrible, Jennie—and Jonathan yelling for me to come, and no way to get here quicker. It was, all right!"

Jennie gathered these words like precious jewels. She had them in her thoughts. They were radiant there.

One day—one of those young, vibrant days that sometimes come in February, come lilting of an early Spring, Martha said: "We must take her out for a while. It will do her a world of good. Jimmy is coming . . . we'll take her for a little ride—"

Chickie said: "Oh—yes—" The blood flew wildly to her face. "I won't go, Martha dear. I'll stay home and have everything warm when you get back."

"Nonsense! You need a little change yourself—Get on your things now. I'll help Jennie."

Chickie went into her room, seized with an overpowering wish to fling herself on the bed—cry and cry. It seemed to her that she would die meeting Jimmy—laughing, talking—pretending—Why couldn't they leave her alone—let her be—

She didn't want to go out; didn't want to meet the old life she had known when the days were all so glad.

Then she heard the bell ring—a laugh in the hall—Jimmy's, eager: "Get a move on there!"

Her face in the mirror was ashen, lines at her mouth. She marked the pale lips with rouge. But tears made tracks in the powder. She had to wipe it off and try again.

Jimmy carried her mother to the car. They propped her up with pillows. Jennie was excited and smiled. Martha sat with her. Chickie was in the front with Jimmy.

She stumbled getting in. He caught her elbow, saying with a mocking laugh: "Shall I carry you, too, sweetie? What's the matter, my darling? You're white as a ghost."

She turned her head: "Just tired. I've been up a lot."

Jimmy's face sobered. When the car was going swiftly he asked: "Chickie, is it only lack of sleep?"

"What else would you have it, Jimmy, dear?"

"I heard about that, Chickie. Is that why you went away?"

Her breath stopped.

"Well, shouldn't I ask that, Chickie?"

"What do you mean? Yes—quick—ask it—what did you hear—"

"Well, I heard of his marriage."

"Oh—a long while ago—"

"Yes—say, look here, Chickie, you're not going back up there to that fool farm stuff, are you?"

"No—they don't want me to—"

"I should say not! Chickie, how about running this car? Mother has the buck fever. You could take the old ladies out of an afternoon. Good for them—and for you—Well—"

"Oh—maybe—" She drew down low in the seat and turned her face, but not quickly enough. Jimmy saw the tears. He reached his hand over hers—pressed it.

She laughed: "Well—I thank thee, dear old Jimmy—that tear was for my lost looks. You notice them all gone to smash?"

"I did not! Chickie—you're not grieving over that, are you?"

"Tish—I wished it so!"

She saw a ruddy color in his cheeks. He tossed the black hair free. "When will you take a lesson, Chickie? To-night? To-morrow?"

"When Jennie is better. I can't leave her now."

"You mean it, Chickie?"

"Yes—Oh, I mean about the lessons—"

"I get you. Lessons will do."

She glanced at him—a long while. Her lips trembled. She wanted to warn him—she wanted to say: "Oh, leave me alone, Jimmy—oh, if you could know—"

That night Jennie held her hand. She asked tenderly: "Do you care for him, Chickie?"

Chickie didn't answer.

Jennie went on: "He loves you—ah, yes—"

"No, mother—he doesn't. Oh, he doesn't!"

Jennie wiped her eyes.

Chickie lay awake that night. The months that were passed returned. The child lay in her arms—it stirred and gave a little feeble cry.

She shut her ears. Oh, she wouldn't hear—she wouldn't go back.

A voice answered: "No—break his heart—that's right—take the lessons—"

She turned on the pillow, hiding her face. She cried. Oh—what was she to do—what—

The room filled with presences—Agnes Robbins, the doctor—the nurse. They confronted her. She felt suddenly powerless—suddenly beaten to the earth—

She couldn't fight them—

CHAPTER CVI

THE WORLD BECKONS

JIMMY's laugh echoed in her ears. Fixing a tray for Jennie, Chickie paused. She saw the tide of color sweep his face; felt his hand press hers. In a sudden weakness, she sat down—closed her eyes. Close out the world—youth—gladness. She must!

Her life was finished—more completely than Jennie's. There was no future—not for her. She looked down years, blank, monotonous, desolate. Looked and forced her lips to smile.

But a panic stole moistly upon her. Her heart beat loud. Twenty-two—she was just twenty-two. Years, many years, and no laughter; no sparkle. She said with drawn, white mouth, softly: "Ho—never mind—never mind—"

She wanted this emptiness, this waste. Leave her alone, unnoticed there. This was her clamorous prayer.

She couldn't go back, not into the happy world again. She didn't want to. She had enough.

Now—because of Jimmy she was frightened. She wanted to hide from him and the teasing, eager look of his eyes.

There was Jennie. She could cling to Jennie. She could say. "Jimmy darling—not to-day, No, not to-morrow—can I leave her all alone? Now, would you want a selfish piece like that sitting in your sweet little car?"

Jimmy said with a new stubbornness and a grin: "All right, girl. I'll call again." He came close and caught both of Chickie's elbows and laughed down in her face: "You need me, Chickie. Do you know that?"

She lowered her eyes.

"Yes, you do! And you need care as much as Jennie does—"

"Jimmy—please—not yet—"

Other years he had turned away. Now he shrugged, "I'm patient."

Chickie was afraid of the moment when Jennie would no

longer need her. One afternoon Jennie went into the kitchen, poked about the pantry, arranging dishes. Chickie flew at her, white faced. "What do you mean, mother? Go in and sit in the sun."

Jennie blushed and laughed: "I'm afraid you want to keep me an invalid for life, Chickie, dear. But I'm just fine now—"

After a while Jennie asked: "Do you mind staying at home with me so much, Chickie?"

"No—it's a gorgeous rest."

"Do you think you'll go back to work with Mr. Mitchell?"

"I don't know."

"Well, there's no hurry—as long as you're happy—"

"Of course."

Yet the whole world seemed to be beckoning, calling her back, demanding that she take a part. Mary was always running in now of an evening; always insisting that Chickie come for a walk—go on a shopping tour.

One evening just before dinner they stopped at Mary's house. It was time for little Edward to be in bed. He was three now—an impish, magnetic little fellow, the dark eyes full of roguery.

He said to Chickie with a grin like Jimmy's: "You very pitty—hee, hee—very pitty." He climbed into Chickie's lap, insisting that she tell the old story of "The Three Bears."

Suddenly Mary, watching them, said: "There are finer things in store for you, Chickie. That's why it happened."

Chickie hid her face against the little fellow's head. She managed with a laugh: "Ho, is this a belated condolence, Mary? You mean that you know of his marriage and offer your kind sympathy?"

"Well, I read of it months ago. I felt awful, especially when you came back looking such a wreck. Now it occurs to me that there must be some richer gift—"

"I have no doubt of it, indeed!"

Mary went on resolutely: "Well—I believe it, Chickie—I always did feel that you were born for great things. I'd forget it—if I were you—forget it—"

Just then Edward snuggled his head against Chickie's neck. His nose was cold. He said imperiously: "Stop talking—talking—talking—tell me the story, Chickie—" He twisted against her.

She put him on the floor hastily. She laughed: "You tell it, Mary—I have to go—it's late—" But she went back, kneeling on the floor and suddenly pressed the little fellow's face against her throat. She kissed him.

Hurrying home, her eyes filled with tears. She kept saying: "Forget it—ho—" As she half ran along she felt a weight in her arms—a coldness at her breast—the dead baby's face—

It was the next day that Janina called her on the phone. Chickie was so startled, hearing the clear, fine voice—an icy muteness held her. Janina said: "Well, ole thing—what's the matter?—I've just called your friend, Mary Blake Mc-Pike, to find out what foul play had happened. She told me you were back and in the old place. What's the big idea? Why didn't you let me know?"

"Oh—I meant to—" Chickie stammered, wondering if Mary had told too much—if Mary had let Janina know that the old folks had never been away. "I meant to—but, you see, Jennie was so ill—they came back—"

"Well—listen—come down to lunch to-morrow—I've got a bushel of news—"

"All right—all right—"

At every turn Fear dogged her—fear of Jimmy, of Mary—now of Janina.

Dressing to meet her, Chickie was now hot, now cold. Color raced into her cheeks—left them blanched. She said to herself, dully, "Some day I'll give it all away! Lord!"

And she began to think of the ranch house; of Agnes Robins and the astonishment when they found her gone; the blank question on their faces when they learned of the baby's death. She must write to Agnes—say she had been desperately ill after her mother's recovery. Nearly a month now—she would explain—tell of the horror of the child's dying—

Tell her she was coming up as soon as she was strong enough. She wished to visit the baby's grave—put flowers there—

Janina met her at the restaurant. Janina's smile was just open welcome. "Fine old thing, you are, Chickie, and you know I love you! Couldn't you spare a moment to answer? Here, I've just bombarded that hotel with mail. Why didn't you leave your forwarding address. No telling what valuable letters are lying up there in wait—"

"I left in such a hurry—"

"Thank heaven for Jennie and her illness if it brought you back—bury yourself on a ranch!"

"I like it, Janina."

"Kid yourself, ole dear—don't hand me any tall line. You've been back four weeks, good old Mary Blake told me—"

"About that."

Janina leaned across the table. "You're coming out with us this Saturday night, Chickie. I've got something choice—a real one—an honest-to-God man this time. No—I'm not joking, Chickie. He's a find! I've saved him for you. I'm not his type or you'd never get him—"

Chickie tilted her chin—"Men! Give him to Stella!"

Janina's long white hands—the hands, the fingers curved back sensuously, turned slowly: "He's yours, Chickie! No one else is worthy! Besides I've promised you to him—"

Chickie grew silent. She paid no attention.

Janina said in an awed, stricken tone: "Chickie—are you thinking of him—yet?"

"Don't be an idiot!"

"Well—life is long, ole dear—remember that. Youth is short. By the way, he's in town. I met him the other night. We had quite a talk."

"Yes? Does that interest me, Janina?"

"I believe it does—tragic as it is! Funny thing—he asked quite a number of times about you. Doesn't look too gay himself. That's a fact."

"I hope you didn't tell him where I was, Janina?"

"Well—I said you were on a ranch and having a mad time of it and breaking all the farmers' hearts. I didn't tell him anything more. What business is it of his?"

"Was she out here with him?"

"Not then—I believe he's here on business. Dear Papa Moore has given him a nice, soft job, I understand. Anyway, he was stopping at the St. Francis. I'm not sure whether he said he was going back and they were both coming out for a visit or that she was to join him—" Janina shrugged. Suddenly she said: "An odd thing, Chickie, but I'd like to bet a hat he's not happy—"

"Keep your consolation, Janina—"

"Well—something's biting him—"

Chickie said quietly: "I wonder—well—"

"You'll come with us, Saturday?"

"I can't—I can't leave Jennie."

Janina's lips curled: "Let the king go by, I suppose?"

"Yes—let him—all of them, Janina! I never bow the knee to a king again, old dear."

"Don't, baby—there never was a king born of woman that could stand it!"

That night Chickie unpacked her trunk. She locked her door as she did this. She hid away all of the baby's clothes. She drew out the envelope with the \$250 Barry Dunne had sent. Oh—he didn't want it to suffer because of him.

She wrote a note. It was this: "It may not rejoice because of you—neither shall it suffer."

She put the bills in this. She sent it to him at the St. Francis.

CHAPTER CVII

THE VISITOR

THERE was a bundle hidden under a heap of old shoes in Chickie's closet. One morning when Jennie was feeling so well she began to sing a little, Chickie took this bundle and rode down Valencia Street. She was going to give it away—shirts, little gowns, blankets.

She was nervous about it and put it on the floor under her feet. Some one nudged her elbow.

"Pretty big lunch you carry these days, Chickie!" Sarah Dillon, the homely, good-natured girl who lived around the corner, kicked the package with her toe and slid into the seat at Chickie's side.

Chickie's face was crimson with the shock. She had a picture of the paper suddenly springing apart. After a moment she answered flippantly: "Oh, my, yes—a turkey and two or three young squabs." She wished to get off the car.

Sarah rambled on: "Not working, Chickie? Neither am I. You heard about ma, didn't you? She got struck by an automobile. Oh—that's so—you've been away. Well, I'm home running the shebang now. It's all right—but give me an eight-hour job any day. Didn't run off to get married, did you, Chickie? I heard you were engaged. Just think, it's nearly five years since we left school—getting old—you haven't changed a bit—" She surveyed Chickie with open admiration—"pretty as ever. Lord, Chickie, I thought you'd be picked off long ago. Imagine Mary Blake beating you to it—but you never can bet on a man. I suppose you're waiting for a millionaire—are you?"

"A crown, Sarah—a country estate and a limo to go with every hat—That's enough! Here's where I get off—"

The bundle weighed heavily. Sarah looked after her from the car window and waved. A little thing like that oppressed and frightened her. She wondered what Sarah would say—what all the world would say, if abruptly they were to know.

She walked quickly to the orphanage of the Salvation Army. There was a desk in the hall—no attendant. Chickie left the bundle and hurried away.

No one saw. No one knew—she went along in the morning breeze and the sun. People treated her just the same—they saw no difference in her. She was the same. A sense of freedom touched her. She wished to intensify the feeling. She went down town to meet Janina.

It was noon. As she walked up Montgomery Street girls stopped to laugh and chat. How was the farmerette? Glad to be back? Have a great time—back to the soil and all that—

After each greeting she felt lighter—more secure. She could take up her old place again—not the same—but only herself would know.

Janina had a little shopping to do. They went to Grant Avenue. Picking over ribbons in an aisle counter, Chickie happened to glance toward the elevators. She saw a stout, rosy girl with blonde hair step out—come toward her. Her thought collapsed . . . the girl in the town store—the girl who had sold her and Agnes Robbins materials, ribbons—baby things—

She said to Janina: "Let's get out—close in here—" and, deliberately turning her back, rushed to the door—

Janina gripped her arm—"Hell's bells! Well—what's up?"

Chickie dashed along, half leaning on Janina's arm. Finally she said: "It was some one I saw—I didn't want to see—that's all—"

"You poor loon! Can't you give a more accomplished snub than this? Dash for death—the latest in rural elegance. Deliver us!"

Chickie was thinking. "I wonder if it was Lena? Was it? Was she coming to meet me?"

Safe now, she wasn't at all certain. Perhaps not, but it looked like her.

If it were Lena Joyce and she said, "Oh—how do you do, Mrs. Clayton! I heard the baby died. Awful sad. I felt sorry for you—" she would blurt that out right before Janina.

Fear grew heavy within her. Any day she might meet people from the small town—Dr. Emerson or the nurse who had bought lilies and little pink roses. They would recognize her; would call her "Mrs. Clayton"; speak of the child; ask

after her health; had she suffered any setback; did she like the little monument—

That night Chickie sat in her room after Jonathan was in bed and Jennie was long since asleep. She began to count up all the people who knew, who might some day confront her. She got up and walked about the room in her bare feet—twisting her hands. It would come out—it was bound to—

She dropped on her knees, covering her face. No—that wouldn't happen—it wouldn't. She asked God not to do this to her—she grew frantic—prayed wildly: "Don't dare! Don't dare!"

A mad restlessness seized her—get away—miles—oceans distant—the three of them—hide in some remote place—

For days she didn't leave the house. She sat in the garden with Jennie. Then, often looking into her mother's gentle eyes, she had a wish to kneel before her—press her face against her mother's knee—tell it—oh, if she might just share it with one other—if she might tell it all—just once. Then she would be free—

Jonathan noticed her pale. Jonathan went about these days with a chuckle. One evening he came into the kitchen as she was cooking the dinner. He swung her about, his hands on her shoulders. "What's the matter, Chickie, girl? I don't hear you sing so much. Did you leave your heart up there in the mountains?"

"Ho—Johnny—indeed, perhaps much more than that."

"Do you want to go back for it? And Jennie and I are holding you?"

"Flatter yourself, old boy! I left not a thing there that I ever want again."

He was a persistent old fellow, that Jonathan. "Do you hear from the lad, Chickie, girl?"

"Now, which of the seventy-nine, your lordship? And who is it wishes to know?"

"Your mother thought you were pining for him, Chickie."

"Ho—Jennie and her days of lavender. Jennie might die of love, Jonathan, but Jennie's daughter won't. So there—now shush!"

"Never you mind, Chickie, girl; and what color do you like?"

"Color? Are you out of your mind? What do you mean—color?"

"Answer—blue or red or perhaps brown?"

Jennie came in and he asked her. Jennie answered, "Blue."
"Then blue it is!"

For quite a while he went about laughing at them and saying, "Blue it is!"

One noontime he came home and shouted through the open door: "Blue—it is—see for yourselves!" And the old giant seized them and rushed them to the street. An automobile, small, closed, but painted blue—blue as millions might have made it—stood at the curb.

They were aghast. They thought he had taken leave of his senses. He laughed at them. He said to Chickie: "Your old dad knows a thing or two of high finance!"

After much hedging he told them: "Your friend, Mr. Munson, Chickie. He invested for me—that oil money of mine—" "When?"

"Oh—shortly after that deal of mine. You remember when you went to see him. I visited him. I took counsel with him. He advised me. I doubled the \$1,500. Been a good deal over a year, you know. Fine fellow—that Jake! Step in—"

He looked like a mountain towering over the steering wheel. He sat forward and spread out his elbows but he could drive.

That night he wrapped his arms about Chickie: "It's for you, Chickie girl. Your old dad can give you a thing or two that some lads couldn't! How about the little springs now? Ready to sing?"

She lowered her head against him—covered his grizzled cheek with her lips—"Jonathan—oh, you darling—darling—"

Some joy left—oh, yes—they loved her so—those two—she should be glad for them. She would.

She took long walks with Wildie when loneliness oppressed her; when Jimmy's insistence made her desolate. She said to herself, "Oh, I should be glad—I should—"

But she wasn't. Fear never left her—a stray word—a searching look set her trembling. She was yearning to go back to the little town—hear if anything was said—look at the grave.

One day she went to the library—found the weekly paper of the town. It was an issue of seven weeks previous—just after she had left. She saw the name, "Mrs. John Clayton." There was an account of her disappearance from the ranch . . . then an explanation—and comment.

This filled her with terror. She sought other issues of the

paper but could find none. She went out of the building in a state of suffocation.

Not long after this coming home one afternoon she saw a machine at the door. It was spattered with mud—dust covered. She stared at it. It was directly in front of the cottage.

She went quietly up the stairs—into the hall—voices in the living room—a man was saying: "Mrs. John Clayton—"

Chickie shrank—she cowered against the wall—

Jonathan said—"No one by that name—"

A pause—"Well—oh—I've made a mistake—Miss Bryce—Miss Helena Bryce—"

"My daughter—"

"She was up in the San Joaquin—"

"Yes—are you from the Farm Bureau—she's not going back—"

"I see—well—Miss Bryce was a friend of Mrs. Clayton's—We want to clear up—"

Chickie lunged. She crushed her hands over her heart—She said—"Oh—you wish to see me—" and stood at the door, ashen—smiling—waving Jonathan and Jennie away—The room spun about her—

CHAPTER CVIII

THE SUMMONS

TRACKED her!

Come to beat her down, shout it to the world. No! Dying, she would fight. She stood up now with the smile frozen on her deadening lips, motioned them away.

The man said: "If you don't mind, I have business with Miss Bryce."

She repeated, "Yes, business," and leaned on the table, unable to move, seeing dimly Jonathan's towering form as it passed into the hall—seeing in a blur the red, heavy face of the stranger. She shut her eyes. Dreaming—yes, a nightmare she was having. She would open them—laugh.

But she asked, gasping, "Business? Well?"

"Sorry, miss—sorry—nothing to be frightened about. Just want you to clear up a little. You see, the coroner didn't like the look of things. Dare say it's all right, all right, but there was a lot of talk around the ranches after you left. Want you to clear up about the baby's death."

A cry, maddened, imploring, "Oh, oh!" She tried to tear words from her throat. "The doctor—oh, the doctor knows!"

"Yes—oh, it's all right, I guess. Don't be alarmed. We just want you to straighten things out. Coroner isn't satisfied. Just want you to come back up there with me."

"With you—you? I don't understand."

"Nothing to fear, miss. Just an inquest."

She pressed her fingers into her cheeks, stared, repeating again and again: "Inquest—inquest—it's dead—long ago—a long time."

"Yes—this is just an investigation. No charges—none at all. Coroner wants your statement. You see—it was rather hasty the way you left—been a lot of talking done. Queer thing for the doctor to take charge the way he did. That's all. You're only to appear as a witness."

"Go back—up there? With you?" She took a little step, wringing her hands. Her voice broke. "I can't—I can't—"

"Better, miss; better for you to come quietly. That's the only way to do. Makes it neater all around. Just want you to tell your story—why you left—how and when the baby died—why you didn't stay for the funeral. The baby died in your presence—in your arms—then you left—"

"Oh—oh—" And it was suddenly in her arms again—a weight—a coldness—an agony. Waters rose—the room swam—voices thrumming dull, like blows: "Died in your arms—clear it up; no charges—just that you, being the mother—"

And she saw Jonathan walking in the hall. Jonathan hearing. She cried out. The sound died on her lips. She took a step and moaned—shrill, desperate, agonized: "Go! Jonathan—go! Leave—"

She saw her father turn—saw an astonishment as though his heart staggered. She saw that and flung her hands outward, pitching headlong to the floor.

Chaos about her. Jonathan, the man—a struggle; Jonathan ordering: "Go—get out of here—what have you done—"

The man answering: "Sorry, sir—sorry—"

Broken sobs. God of anguish—that was Jennie crying so—like a child in terror: "A baby? My Chickie? A baby? Oh—did you say that—why—"

Chickie called: "Mother—mother—" But her lips were dumb. Oh—reach the door—dash from them—hurl herself out—die—die now—

A form towered. She crouched. It grew bigger. Jonathan—her father—darling old Jonathan. He lurched—gray visaged, no longer a thing of flesh and proud, tender eyes. A man of granite; emptied of life; emptied of joy; a stone with death beneath; death chilling the thought from him.

Blindly as one groping through a dream of horror he reached out—he caught her: "Chickie—Chickie! Stop! Chickie—deny it—it's not so! Tell your mother—tell her—" He shook her.

"My God!"

For she sank—she clasped her hands, her head dropping back. She sank against him. The cry that sprang from Jonathan's soul went into hers and killed it. "My God! My God!"

Then she tried to run—rush with lowered head along the floor.

But he stooped, caught her, wrapped her in his arms—great, sinewy arms. His voice rumbled, "Get out—didn't I tell you.

You don't take her. By God, no! Get out!" And like that, straining her, he raised her to his shoulder, carried her from the room.

All the time that tortured cry of love that dies breaking on her ears: "My God! My God!"

Hearing it, she tried to beat his hands away. She pushed with all her frenzied strength and sobbed: "Let me go—you let me go—you will!"

But he laid her on the bed. He said, with his lips white under the straggly mustache: "Chickie—Chickie girl—your dad—"

She hid from him. She pushed him away. He wiped her face. He kissed it. And suddenly lifting her in his arms he rocked her—as though she were a baby. Holding her like that, fast against him, he cried. He cried and cried.

Her heart broke, and all her faith and hope. It grew dark. It was quiet. Only a cry—a dying cry in her ears. She knew that—and nothing.

For it had happened—the brutal thing. Months of piteous bravery; months of aching aloneness. Now this—oh, the world would know—and Jimmy—and Mary—oh, all—all—

Figures moved in her room. They whispered. And there was a thing that had been glad—the proudest heart in all the earth **because** of her—that Jonathan. Now he walked about the hall. He chewed his lips—he chewed his heart—

Then Jennie came and sat beside the bed. Her hands were over her eyes. Chickie knew nothing—nothing of this.

She would awaken, drink it all anew, fresh mulled with pain.

In her dreams she prayed. The dreams brought drops like cold heavy blood to her forehead. She told them. Oh, it died—oh, she was bringing it home—bringing it to them—then it grew cold—so cold—here—right here against her breast—feel it—put your hand there—oh, all the time it was there—always—

Half conscious she cried out: "Jonathan—go—" and would have sprung from the bed: would have dashed to the window. No—they didn't know. They couldn't know. God wouldn't do this to her—God would not dare— "Go—oh, Jonathan—you go!"

Jennie turned at that, but Jonathan came and kneeled at Chickie's bed. He pressed his old face in her hands, murmuring: "Chickie—Chickie girl—"

Night worse than death—night when youth creeps away and every vestige of joy—even the last shred of hope—

She was awake. She turned from them, begging to die. Oh, let her die—she would—she would—

Jennie touched her hands. She wept, and couldn't find it in her heart to say the slightest word. Jennie hid her face on Chickie's shoulder. Chickie said: "Oh, leave me, mother—go—oh, you kill me—oh, if I could die—mother, go—go—"

It was Jonathan who put his arm on Jennie's shoulder. He said quietly, "No, mother, stay."

He looked at Chickie, but there was no chuckle in his eyes. Yet a new thing—a light—a deep, sacred light. He lifted her in his arms. He crooned about her as though he were the mother.

"We'll meet it, Chickie, girl—you and your old dad together."

"No—oh, Jonathan—God—God—I won't—I tell you no!"

She tried to slip from him.

"But here, now—here, now—"

"Jonathan, I won't go there—I won't—oh, dead—it died. I held it—oh, you know—you know—"

"Here, now—here, now—"

"You won't take me back—no—no—"

"Chickie, girl, we're brave—you and your old dad. Never mind now."

And there was no escape. He knew this. Now she knew it—bear it all—stand up and take it all.

CHAPTER CIX

EXPOSURE

THEY knew. The blasting shame was hers. After all.

Months of crucifixion—an awful night when she had run along a pier. The waters were so dark, so cold, lapping at her feet—Oh—that she had dropped in then—forgotten now—

She sat at her window, dressed, inert, dumb. She didn't remember having dressed—didn't recall how she came to be sitting there—so early now—so hushed and sweet the morning air. Tears stood in her eyes. They didn't fall. She made no slightest move; the strings of her being were muted.

They knew—those two in there, knew—

Yet the sun flared out; a sparrow chirped; Jennie's hyacinths exhaled a perfume to the singing breeze. Beauty of a young live world; world of spring; near, at her hand—but not for her. She was quiet in a darkness; shoved into a waste.

Beating desolately against her like waves on a ship that sinks, that gives up the fight and sinks, were the words, the frenzies, the anguish of the night just gone. She let her head drop back; let the memories beat.

Ah—Jonathan had rocked her in his arms. But Jennie said, frightened, unbelieving: "A baby! My Chickie?"

Suddenly, unbearable as a knife running through her flesh it had come to her that Jennie—little Jennie—her mother with the plump and gentle breast, would rather she had died—much rather—would give her up gladly—put her in a grave. Chickie had run then to a window; sought to hurl herself out. A doctor had come; they had forced some drink to her lips. Deadness crept upon her—a leaden absence.

It was upon her now. Six o'clock—in two hours that man with the red, heavy face would come for her; take her back to the valley—force her again through all the tragic scenes. Make her tell about the baby; how it grew so cold; how it stiffened in her arms. Oh—tell to all that whispering town the thing that she had done—the things that had been done to her.

They said she must. She must do this— But it would be a dead thing that spoke—not her—

Now, there was a stirring in that room of theirs. Now Jonathan was soothing: "Mother, don't! Hush, mother. That's no way." Crying—Jennie cried all night. Too late now—

Then Jonathan was coming down the hall. She heard his weighty steps. Coming to her, coming to say those kindly things—ah, but she would see the paleness of his lips; see his face all crossed with pain. Leave her alone—step over quietly and lock her door—

Suddenly there was a ringing at the bell; suddenly voices—a man who said: "You might as well, Mr. Bryce. Give her side of it. It's out, already—"

Jonathan answering, suppressed, bewildered. Then rumbling in a low fury: "By God, you don't! By God, I'll kill you!"

A door slammed; a lurching, giant body pitching from wall to wall.

Chickie's hands flew to her throat. She reached her father's side. He pushed her; plowed like a tortured animal down the passage—into the kitchen. He had the morning paper in his hand. He said: "Go away—Chickie—go away—"

She held to his arm—tried to speak. Her breath whirled dizzily—in a sickness. "Let me see—"

He shook his head. She begged, half fainting: "Oh, yes—I will—I will—" and snatched the paper from his lifeless hand.

Only a line of that she saw: "San Francisco Girl in Death Probe." Only that. The blood went hot and thick and made a blindness in her eyes. She fought it back.

She turned from him with that gone and broken look in the rugged face. She said in a quiet: "Doesn't matter." Then read it word for word—

"Summoned to attend a coroner's inquest called at Moppet to inquire into the death of her infant daughter two months ago, under circumstances declared mysterious, Mrs. John Clayton, Fair Oaks Street, was served with a subpoena by Deputy Sheriff Bert Ricks of Stanislaus County last night. She will accompany him to Moppet to-day.

"According to Ricks, a quiet investigation of the case has been under way by the authorities for several weeks. The

child, born on the ranch of Mrs. Agnes Robbins, north of Moppet, is declared to have been in good health when secretly taken away by the mother four days after birth.

"It is alleged to have died the same evening in the sanitarium of Dr. Robert Emerson, who attended the mother at the birth. Mrs. Clayton, Ricks said, then hurriedly left for her home in San Francisco, leaving funeral arrangements with Dr. Emerson. He is said to have signed the death certificate. The physician has also been summoned to appear before the coroner's jury.

"Added mystery, Ricks declares, is the fact that Mrs. Clayton was known as Miss Helena Bryce in Stockton, where she stopped at a fashionable hotel for several days at a time prior to the birth of the infant. Search for John Clayton has been fruitless.

"No one by the name of Mrs. John Clayton is known at the residence in Fair Oaks Street, where Jonathan Bryce, well known painter and long a resident of the Mission district, has his home. Bryce refused to discuss the connection of his daughter, Miss Helena Bryce, with the case."

She read it again. Madness—silence—Jonathan, upright, great arms lifting her: "Brave, Chickie girl—brave—"

Then she was lying on a bed and shades were drawn—lying quietly as one in a coffin. Soon they would come and pull the cover—oh, the peace of that—how she would smile—rest then . . .

She stared at the curtains—the new pongee curtains Jennie had made, being so glad to have her home again; wanting to surprise her—

Then Jennie came in with a tray—like all those festive Sunday mornings. But Jennie didn't look at her. She said gently: "Chickie, dear—drink this—you must be strong—"

Chickie said: "Oh, mother—the look of your face—oh, mother—"

"No, dear—why, I'm all right—drink it—you must leave soon—"

Chickie turned her face against the pillow. Jennie insisted: "Drink it, dear."

"Oh—if I could die—and I will, mother—I will—"

"No—here—"

"You'd be glad—oh, if you knew—" She pushed the cup away—she closed her hands on her face—

And there were voices again—the house was filled with voices. Jennie came back to the room— "Get ready, dear." Like a sentence of doom—as though Chickie were in the death chamber and it was her mother—no other than her mother who came and drew the black cap down— She stood, holding to the bureau—trying to straighten her hair—trying to find a glove that lay directly before her.

Then she listened to the voices and a shock went through her. For the voice was saying: "Don't let her worry—it will be all right! We'll see to that—"

She must be raving—she must have lost her mind. For she fancied the voice was Jake's. He was talking to her father—and Jonathan listened and seemed to grow rugged again—

A step—light, elastic—an arm about her. Oh—she cowered—she drew back. It was Jake. Talking to her—rich, mellow voice—gentle—confident—

"Don't be afraid, Chickie, my dear. I don't want to bother you. But don't be crushed by this. Too bad. I came to tell you something—tell you that it will be all right. I know Dr. Emerson—know him well. I phoned this morning. It's a shame—bringing you into this. Case of professional jealousy. Rick is the coroner—never loses a chance to block the doctor. You see, the doctor is a newcomer and has stolen all his thunder. It's a small town feud. They've brought you into that—"

Though she wouldn't look at him—though she couldn't steady her lips to the forming of a single word, Jake took her hands that were so cold in his warm, firm clasp. He said: "My poor, little darling—don't worry—no one will think of this, Chickie, my dear. That's why I came. You mustn't want to hide away. Look here—I have a friend in Stockton—a lawyer—brilliant fellow. He has business all up the valley. I've asked him to step in there this afternoon. Do as he says, Chickie. Answer as he tells you to. It will be all right—yes, it will. Your friends won't change."

She knew that the black, flashing eyes were full of sorrow—they went kindly over her blanched, still face. He pressed her hands—he lowered his head and kissed them. He said, softly: "They won't hurt you—we won't let them do that—"

He was gone.

Jonathan came—squared his giant's form. He took her arm—he even smiled.

She said—with her lips moving pitifully, "You're not coming—oh, Jonathan—"

"Would I let you go alone? Do you think that, Chickie girl—your old dad—"

So they went.

CHAPTER CX

THE INQUEST

So many times Chickie had glanced at her face in the mirror, and flushing to find herself so radiant had gone singing through the hall; had kissed Jennie with such a princess' grace. Jennie was so shy and pleased; so proud of this, their pretty one. Her eyes had often filled, just for the tenderness. Wondrous to have that slim, bright creature coming and going in a little cottage like this—loving them—

Chickie knew her mother's thought, read it well.

And to-day, pulling a veil over her hat, she paused. Oh, shame is hard to take; hard to bend a head that has been high. Jennie felt it so. That was the thing that hurt; that went into Chickie's lifeless heart and stirred the chords to pain.

She stood beside her mother and felt so crushed she didn't even raise her hand. She waited with dry eyes and whitened lips.

Slow, heavy tears ran to Jennie's chin. Her hand, soft now, but thin, crept to Chickie's shoulder, brought Chickie's head down. It was like sobbing the way she said: "Ah—ah—Chickie, dear—"

"Good-by—well, good-by, mother—"

Jennie clung to her.

Chickie begged: "Oh, mother, don't—" and dropped the veil about her face.

Then Jennie cried and stood half hidden at the door and didn't wait till they were gone but closed it softly. Closed it softly as one who has a thing to hide and cannot bear the friendly morning sun. Jennie felt a shame—shame for her, the bright and pretty one—

And Chickie knew it—the pang went deep like a blade turning and turning in a secret wound.

When she let herself all huddle down in the corner of the sheriff's automobile, Jonathan patted her hands. He sat erect and said so gently: "No, now—Chickie girl—"

But she thought, and bowed with the thought: "Jennie is

ashamed. Oh, she hadn't waited; hadn't watched them go. She had closed the door so softly. Fearing faces at other doors; fearing curious glances and eyes peeping from windows.

In the morning papers it was blazoned out. Helena Bryce had a child and it was dead. They were taking her back to Moppet to see why it should die; why she had run away—

Eight o'clock. Sitting at breakfast now, all the girls she knew; men she knew. They were reading and gasping and saying to one another: "Did you see that—look here—" Avid, knowing looks were in their eyes.

Mary was reading it, pain and wonder in her thought. Knew why she had gone away—knew why she was quiet.

Jimmy? Was Jimmy reading it? She fancied his face grow white; fancied him striking his fist against the table; his heart turned cold—

Oh, blessed release to rush away from that; escape the murmurs and the questions. They sped along. Never return. Go on and on. No crueler thing could happen now. Walk through that town and let them all come out and fling their stones. She might even turn pathetically and smile, feeling no added bruise. No added hurt could reach her now.

So she thought and listened, uncaring, to the loquacious comfort the sheriff kept turning to offer. "Fine morning, Mr. Bryce. We're making good time. Be there in another hour. Nothing to worry about. Just a mixup between that there new doctor and the coroner. Emerson's got the high-hand in the town and Larry Mitford don't like it. The girl's bound to come out of it all right."

They swept through the mountain pass. The hills rolled down to the chalice fields, so green now with spring running from slope to slope in merry slippers of blue and gold.

Chickie caught the flashing color—suddenly she was remembering. Oh, often they had gathered the deep yellow poppies, raced like children after purple lilies. Often she had seen his head raise, his profile etched in glory. How her heart had flushed in its eager love!

He was in the city. She hadn't thought of that. And had he, too, read of this? He also knew she was a marked and beaten thing. She put her hand upward and hid from Jonathan the doubling of her chin. She wondered how the thought of him could twist her now.

But it did. And terribly a little later.

The inquest was set for half past two. They reached the town at twelve—stole in so quietly that only the clerk at the hotel and two or three loungers sitting on the rail of the porch knew who had come. The sheriff got a room for them.

Jonathan placed her in a chair. In a clumsy way he pulled down the shades—shutting the light from the oak bed, the red and blue matting on the floor. He said, "Just you sit here, Chickie girl. I'll have some lunch brought up. Won't be long."

The door had scarcely closed. It opened. Chickie didn't stir until a strange voice said, "I beg your pardon." A man stepped to her side, handed her a note.

She let it lie in her hands.

"I'll wait for an answer."

Mechanically she opened it. She read this: "Chickie, see me for a moment. I want to say a word. I'm waiting near. You have several hours. Give me just a moment. Chickie, don't refuse this. Don't make me do more harm than I've done already."

She folded the bit of paper in a measured and aching slowness. She fought to keep her lips quite still. For they were feeling again that kiss, so light, so crushing in its bitter humiliation; the kiss he had given her the night she had come to him pleading—when she asked, "Do you mean that you will marry me?"

But, no—he hadn't meant that—

She forgot the man waiting there. He said: "There is an answer?"

She shook her head.

"Will you come with me? It's not far."

She repeated, wondering: "Ho—go with you?"

"You would feel sorry for him—"

"Ho—yes—" She clasped her hands, twisting the pale fingers. The man shifted uneasily.

Finally he asked: "Have you counsel for this afternoon?"

She repeated dully, "For this afternoon—why do you ask these things of me? Ho—there is no answer. None." She got up and faced him—rocking a little, but smiling. "Will you go? Kindly go—" Her cheeks were bloodless—whiter than her lips.

The man said hurriedly: "Pardon me—I beg your pardon. Have you given his name—"

Her hand reached out. "Ho—oh, ho—I see—oh—" She caught the chair—steadied herself.

The man left then. Chickie stood there swaying, repeating in a soft, broken wildness, "Ho—his name—ho—"

His name—she wouldn't have spoken it to save her soul from doom. She couldn't have forced her lips to bring the sound—

Yet it added to her shame; it left no slightest beauty even in a memory. It added to the loneliness.

So that when Jonathan came and tried to make her eat, she half wondered that even Jonathan should care.

Oh—but he did. He drew her to him, raised her face as he had in other times when its beauty was his joy. He raised it, saying: "Chickie girl, remember, I want you to stand up there this afternoon—proud now, my girl. I want you to be brave. No tears—not one."

She pulled her face away. She said: "Yes—oh, my, yes!"

But he kept whispering things like that as they drove through the hot streets, stopping before a house, newly painted—white and austere. A crowd was gathered—they pushed to the machine—young girls with bobbed hair and city ways—indolent, lanky men.

Chickie had to pass through that. Jonathan and the sheriff shouldered them away. But she heard: "That's her!" "Quick!"

The front parlor of the coroner's home served as the undertaking place. Here was the inquest. The room was packed—warm, heavy with many breaths. Some one edged toward her—caught her hand: "This is a shame, Mrs. Clayton. I regret this deeply."

It was Dr. Emerson. Then every one was standing and pushing. He raised his hand. They backed—took their chairs again. "I would have advised you—spared you the shock, but I didn't know where to reach you."

Chickie mumbled: "Thank you."

They led her to the front of the room—to a little table near the bay windows. She sat there and Jonathan with her.

Some one came up and put an arm about her; some one said: "Dearie—dearie—"

It was Agnes Robbins. "I'm going to talk—I'll tell—why, it was the weakest little thing! Dearie—we know you didn't do it—"

"What do you mean, Agnes?"

"Why—well—we know it died—"

"Oh—died—yes—oh, Agnes—"

"Never mind, dearie—we know that—"

And abruptly a stout red-faced woman just behind them interrupted. She said loudly: "Yes, miss—I believe it, too—"

Chickie smiled at her, bewildered—repeating in a daze—"Oh—you believe that—"

The coroner, big, raw boned, bull necked, walked in with a hushed, ceremonious air. He took a chair at the long table.

Emily Faris, the nurse that Chickie had sent away when she had carried off the baby, was called to the stand. Emily Faris didn't look at Chickie.

CHAPTER CXI

THE DOCTOR'S TESTIMONY

EMILY FARIS was a friend of the coroner. It was soon evident.

In the hush that tightened through the room her answers tossed guilt in Chickie's face. Chickie sat there limp, bewildered, letting the guilt dash in hot, red stains about her. She was aware of Agnes Robbins whispering: "It's a shame, dearie—I'll answer her!" Aware of Jonathan, erect but with ashen face, holding her hand, patting and rubbing it. But with each word that Emily Faris spoke, each move of her round, spacious back, so near that Chickie felt its warmth, the brand drove and seared.

The coroner asked: "You attended the woman known as Mrs. John Clayton when her child was born?"

"Yes, sir. Wel', you see being as I lived across the road and being as it came suddenly—"

"Just answer, please. You attended her? You brought the newborn babe to its mother?"

"I did, sir, but she wouldn't look at it. She kept her face hidden. I told her it was a girl. She said: 'Didn't want a girl,' and she wouldn't look at it or hold it."

Chickie trembled. The little, still thing with its soft, red hair—lay at her side again. And it was true. She didn't want a girl—she didn't look at it.

The coroner continued: "You've attended many mothers with their first born. You know what mother love is. Do they usually refuse to look at their children?"

"They do not!"

"How old was the baby when it was carried away by the mother?"

"Four days."

"You saw the child an hour before it was taken away?"

"I did."

"What was its condition? I mean the state of its health?"

"It was as well as could be expected. It was in good health."

"Was there any evidence, so far as you could see, that pointed to its hasty death?"

"None at all."

"The day of the mother's disappearance, as you remember, was cold?"

"Freezing, sir—'twould cut a stone wall. And the wind blew me across the road."

"Mrs. Faris, you have children. Would you expose a newborn infant to the danger of such weather?"

"I would not."

"Did the mother show any interest in her child?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"She was interested in its weakness. The morning of that day when she ran away, I brought the baby to her. I said: 'See if it will nurse.' She didn't want to do it and looked at me very angry. But I put the child right to her. After a while she said to me: 'It's so little. It wouldn't take much to smother a little thing like this—would it?'"

A gasp—then silence dropping in a pall. Jonathan's hand closing—pouring strength into hers. But the red stain flamed now in Chickie's heart. She remembered. She had said it. Just that—the very words.

Yes—she had dozed with the baby against her. She had awakened trembling with fear, from a dream that she had leaned on the child and crushed it. She had told her fright to the nurse.

Now it was repeated; now it was made a vicious thing—a cruel and vicious plan.

Something struck in Chickie's mind then—struck wild. Perhaps it was a sudden image of that little flickering movement on the baby's lips when she had laid it on the ground, blowing the pitiful breath in its mouth; perhaps it was the feel of its tiny hands, so perfect and so cold.

But she rose; her hand reached out—she swayed. The words she meant to say failed. And Jonathan drew her back—drew her quiet, his arm about her. The lawyer Jake had sent whispered: "Raise your veil, Mrs. Clayton. You'll be called soon—raise your veil."

She shook her head.

"Yes—so that they can hear. It will help—"

The coroner asked: "What else, Mrs. Faris?"

"Well, she asked me if I ever knew of a mother smothering her child like that. Of course, I never thought of anything, and I said 'Yes.' She wanted to know all about it. She asked and asked. Then she touched the baby's mouth and its cheeks. She said: 'Why, it's so small, if I were to roll over on it—it would be dead in a moment—'"

Chickie sank down in the chair. The lawyer repeated: "Raise your veil—"

And she did this—showed her white face, her dark eyes. Those about her looked and turned their heads away. Her eyes were hunted things—tortured, pleading things in the marble of her face.

The coroner said: "And that afternoon the mother stole away with the child?"

"Yes."

"And that night the baby was dead?"

"Yes."

Not a breath. Women sat forward, fever in their glances.

The doctor was called. The coroner ran his big forefinger between his collar and his red, bull's neck. He blew a gusty breath from the wide nostrils.

"Is it a fact, Dr. Emerson, that the child known as Merle Clayton was brought to your office dead on the night of January 25?"

"Yes."

"You were not present at the moment of the death?"

"I was not."

"You signed the death certificate?"

"Yes."

"You took charge of the funeral arrangements?"

"Yes."

"The mother left your hospital within an hour after leaving her dead child in your hands?"

"An hour or two."

"She went with your consent?"

Dr. Emerson sat forward, looked directly from face to face of the men sitting against the wall—the coroner's jury. He paused a full moment, then answered swiftly: "She went to her dying mother with my full consent and knowledge! Thank God I could do the service for her."

"Answer the questions, sir!"

"Ask them, your honor!"

"Is it regular or customary for a doctor to sign a death certificate when he knows nothing of the circumstances leading to the death?"

"It is not."

"How many days elapsed since your last visit to this infant and the hour of its death?"

"Two and a half."

"In two days a newborn infant even in the most robust health might come to its death from causes not apparent previously? Is this correct?"

"Quite correct. It might fall from a window; it might be devoured by wolves."

"Quite so. Or it might be smothered by the mother; or taken out and exposed to the elements. It might be removed from a warm bed and carried abroad in the coldest wind of the year?"

The doctor measured his rival and smiled. "Yes—that's true."

"In which case the infant might be brought to your hospital dead? Would you be justified in signing the death certificate without referring the case to the recognized authority—namely, the coroner?"

The doctor hesitated, sensing the trap. He said, gruffly, "I am not here to discuss theoretical questions, but to tell of a certain, definite case that has nothing to do with death from smothering or exposure."

"You can be sure of that—sure that in two days and a half neither of these things could possibly have happened?"

"Very sure."

"Though the infant was brought to you dead?"

"Very sure."

"But you admit the possibility that death might have occurred from other causes?"

"Possibly; but in this case death was due to complete material weakness—death I looked for from the moment of the infant's birth."

"So you are willing to state that an infant admittedly weak could be exposed to a driving wind and suffer no hurt?"

"I state that this child did not die from exposure. An infant of four days in robust health might be thrown in the snow, and it wouldn't die if rescued in time."

"Would you ordinarily advise a child of four days to be taken out in a driving wind storm?"

"I am not here to give advice."

"How many times did the mother of this child visit you before its birth?"

"Twice."

"Had you known her previously, or did you know the father of the child?"

"No."

"Have you ever seen the father?"

"No."

"Did it occur to you, as in any way suspicious, that a young mother four days after the birth of her child should rush out with it in the cold, bring her dead child to you and leave without waiting for the burial?"

"Her mother was dying."

"How did you know this?"

"She told me so."

The coroner sat back and folded his arms. "Very well—that's enough. She told you so!"

Chickie was called.

CHAPTER CXII

JONATHAN'S STAND

At the mention of her name, the silence parted like a gash—whispers spurted; heads turned; sharp, expectant breaths.

Chickie sat motionless, hearing Jonathan's murmured plea: "Remember, Chickie, girl—brave—proud now—go up—" She tried to smile.

Then a hand at her elbow. The lawyer said quietly: "You have nothing to fear. Answer clearly."

All this was vague, yet frightening because of the blur that made the warm room and all the faces in it run together. In this blur she saw with piercing and cruel intensity, the red, perspiring face of the coroner, then suddenly that of the messenger who had come with Barry Dunne's note; the messenger who said: "Have you given his name?" These two faces merged—they were one with four terrible eyes focused upon her.

The coroner asked quietly, assuming an impartial tone: "What is your name?"

And that shocked her. Her hands were clasped—so cold she didn't feel their pressure. But she felt a hundred eyes and she glanced up to them, bewildered. She gave no answer.

"Is your name Helena Bryce?"

No sound. Then: "Were you known here in Moppet and on the ranch of Mrs. Agnes Robbins as 'Mrs. John Clayton'?"

"Yes."

"Are you the mother of the deceased infant known as 'Merle Clayton'?"

"Yes."

"Are you married?"

The lawyer rose: "Just a moment. If you please, Mr. Coroner, I am attorney for the witness. I must instruct her not to answer that question. It has no bearing on the death of the child."

"I beg to differ, sir. My purpose as coroner of this town is to clear a very mysterious case of infant death. There are

certain suspicious circumstances. An unmarried mother might have many reasons for getting rid of her child—"

"Well, Mr. Coroner, my client comes here voluntarily. She is perfectly willing to state all the facts of the baby's death. She wishes to clear the matter. But she is under no compulsion to speak. If you can show foul play in the death of the child, if you can show the mother may be responsible, then I am willing that she answer all questions necessary in proving a motive. But you will have to show that a crime was committed first."

"Very well. Where is your home, Mrs. Clayton?"

Almost inaudible, Chickie answered: "San Francisco."

"You came to the ranch of Mrs. Agnes Robbins five months before your child was born?"

"Yes."

"Your mail was sent from the city through a hotel in Stockton. It was addressed to Miss Helena Bryce?"

The lawyer quietly: "Don't answer."

"But isn't it a fact, Mrs. Clayton, that you sent telegrams on the day of your disappearance signed with the name of Bryce and also that you received messages sent to Helena Bryce?"

"I must object to that, Mr. Coroner. Whether this witness used one name or a dozen has absolutely no bearing on the matter under investigation—namely the death of the infant."

The coroner reared the thick neck as an animal does. He leaned forward till his face was almost on a level with the table. "If the witness wishes to conceal facts, Mr. Attorney, very well. The fact that a woman leads a double life—uses two names, conceals from her parents the birth of a child, bears directly on this case—"

"When you show it, the questions will be answered. But if the purpose of this investigation is merely to embarrass my witness, the witness will be withdrawn—"

"Yes! and a warrant charging murder can be sworn!"

Jonathan stirred then—he lurched forward, started to speak. The lawyer raised his hand. He answered suavely: "Yes—the warrant can be sworn if the evidence is at hand. If there is no evidence, all parties swearing to such a warrant shall be responsible. However, Mr. Coroner, the witness wishes to aid. She is ready to give the complete account of the child's death. I am aware that you, as coroner of this town, can certainly

have no prejudice—no wish to fasten guilt where guilt can not exist. My witness will give all necessary information."

The coroner fixed his large, slothful eyes on Chickie: "Did your parents know of the birth of your child?"

"Just a moment!"

But now the tension sharpened, a scraping of feet, an impatient stirring, but the lawyer turned to the jury: "The question deals with the death, not the birth, of an infant."

The men in the jury watched Chickie. She sat with the pale face lowered—exquisite in its thinness, piercing in its mute despair.

The coroner answered: "The death may be directly traceable to the unfortunate circumstances of its birth. Is it a fact, Mrs. Clayton, that on the fourth day after the birth of your child you secretly removed it from the ranch house of Mrs. Robbins?"

"Yes."

"You knew it was a raw, freezing day?"

"I don't know."

"You knew your child was weak?"

"They said so."

"You left a note saying that you sent the nurse away because she would oppose your going. So you knew it was a dangerous thing to take the child from the house—"

Chickie was suddenly standing at its basket again, seeing the small, unprotesting face, dreaming of placing it in her mother's arms—giving it to them—to Jennie and to Jonathan. She glanced upward, her eyes beseeching. She said, faintly, "I couldn't leave it—I couldn't go and leave it."

"Why did you go?"

"A message—I had a message—"

"That your mother was dying. Is this the message you mean?"

Chickie nodded. Now she sat lower in the chair. She clasped and unclasped her hands. Her eyes seemed to grow large—to take up with their tragic appeal the whiteness of her face.

"You got a message that your mother was dying, and you left, taking the baby with you? You intended to take this child to your dying mother—"

A flickering smile, half wild, went about Chickie's mouth. She said: "Yes—oh—you see—you see—"

"You were to bring the child to them, although a week before its birth you sent this telegram?" He held up a yellow slip of paper. He read the frantic message Chickie had sent. Oh, that was when she was snowbound in the mountains—she couldn't get to them. He read this. The men and women packed into the heated room, with the sun streaming like a warm liquid even through the drawn shades—these men and women craned forward, drinking expectantly the pitiful revelation of Chickie's concealments—Chickie's forlorn, lost fight to hide the shame and the tragedy.

Jonathan had called: "In God's name, come—Jennie is sinking."

That was the day she had rushed to the closet, grabbed the black silk cape, draping it wildly about her—flinging her head back— She was going—going—ah—but she had seen her image and the coldness of her blood went into her heart. It became a leaden thing.

No—she hadn't gone. She had wired: "I'm coming—travel slow on these awful mountains. I have a terribly sprained ankle. I may be delayed."

She went back now to that desperate hour—lost and helpless in it. The coroner spoke twice. Agnes Robbins tapped her shoulder before she heard:

"You were not in the mountains when this message was sent. Isn't it a fact that you were in the valley and on the ranch of Mrs. Robbins at this time and that you were then awaiting the birth of your child?"

A slight, desponding nod.

"On the day your child was born you received another message, asking why you were delayed. You sent no answer to this. Isn't it a fact, Mrs. Clayton, that you went to great lengths to keep secret the birth of your child?"

Chickie looked about the room, imploring, distracted. The faces with their lighted eagerness frightened her. She moved her hands outward—such pretty hands—in a little beseeching gesture. She said: "You see—well, you see—"

The lawyer interrupted: "You may answer the question later, Mrs. Clayton. It has no bearing so far shown, on the case."

"I will show its bearing, Mr. Attorney. This witness states that she left, taking her child with her and that she intended to take it to her dying mother. The facts indicate that she did

not intend to take it home. That she felt herself forced to some other disposal of the child."

"Show these facts, Mr. Coroner—"

"You admit stealing from the ranch house, Mrs. Clayton? You went down the river road. It was windy. Tell about it. Tell about that walk along the river road."

Chickie put up her hand, shielding her face. Sounds came to her lips—low, strangled. The lawyer whispered: "Tell it, Mrs. Clayton—try to speak louder."

Chickie rose a little—and her hands flew suddenly to her breast. She said: "Oh—it was cold—" and she told them—of the baby—its soft hair—its cheeks against her neck—and then so quiet and the flicker of its lips and she had laid it on the ground and blew the breath in its mouth and tried to warm it. There was the picture of it—and of the pale, frantic thing kneeling beside it—trying to keep its life. She said: "I didn't know—I put it here—under my coat—it was so still—it didn't move."

She sank back in the chair, covering her face.

The coroner said: "You put it under your coat?"

Without moving her hand from her eyes, Chickie nodded.

"You held it close against you and ran?"

She nodded again—she said faintly: "Oh—you see—you see—"

"Go on—then what—"

"Oh—I looked at it—it was cold—it was still—"

"That was after you put it under your coat. Is it a fact, Mrs. Clayton, that on the day of your disappearance you spoke to the nurse, Emily Faris, about the smothering of a child? Did you say to her: 'I might roll over on it and in a moment it would be dead!'"

Chickie cried out then. She reeled. She began to speak—"Oh—"

The lawyer shouted, and every one in the room stiffened: "Don't answer. The question seeks to prove an intention of crime; takes it for granted that this witness wished to rid herself of the child. No such fact has been proved."

The coroner banged his fist on the table. "The question is not unfair. We have before us a case of glaring irregularity. A doctor takes a dead child brought by a woman admittedly in hiding—a woman going under two names. The witness has admitted her frenzy. She runs off and leaves her dead infant in

the hands of this town. She starts out with a child of four days—a child whose coming kept her from the bedside of her dying mother; of whose existence they knew nothing. Could she take it to them? She feels herself an outcast—she is an outcast—”

A movement—a giant form pitching between Chickie and the red, moist face of the coroner. Chickie lifted in the mighty arms—a rumble, Jonathan's free hand shaking: “Outcast—by God, no! My daughter, sir—my girl!”

Some one in the rear of the room shouted “Hurrah!” and others took it up. The jury got to its feet. Chickie lay insensible in her father's arms.

CHAPTER CXIII

THE VERDICT

SOMETHING magnetic in the sweep of Jonathan's arm about her, quickening the way he lifted her up, claiming so proudly, "My daughter, sir!"

It struck through the room, an instant vibration as to sudden, elemental music. There came a sobbing, a movement to the table. A woman reached for Chickie's inert hand and kissed it.

Even men on the jury joined in the excited whispering. They pushed forward. The lawyer spoke hurriedly to Jonathan: "Don't get excited. Leave her here. It will be all right. This won't hurt at all."

So they put her in the chair. The beautiful eyes were closed, a touching pathos in the soft contour of her throat, the young girl droop of her head. Jonathan didn't want to let her down—didn't want this avid room of people staring so—

The lawyer spoke to the coroner, who was now calling for order: "Do you wish to continue with the witness? If so, I would suggest again that the investigation be confined to the facts dealing with the death of the infant, and not with opinions on the subject."

The coroner answered, "I have no further questions to ask the witness." He turned to the jury. "The case, gentlemen, seems to have a good many peculiar angles that are not cleared. The evidence shows plenty of motive for a possible crime. But the witnesses are reluctant. It is my duty to sift the matter—to get all the facts—but we can't do this if questions will not be answered. You will have to judge the matter from the evidence at hand—"

The lawyer was again on his feet. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Coroner, the witnesses are perfectly willing to give all facts. If foul play was done, let it be proved. If you wish to clear the matter of the infant's death, there is a woman present who can tell of it; a woman who knows more about this case than any other, in all probability. I refer to Mrs. Agnes Rob-

bins, on whose ranch the mother of the infant lived for five months. Mrs. Robbins was present when the child was born. She saw it within two hours of the time the mother left. I would suggest you call Mrs. Robbins to the stand."

Larry Mitford's large, beefy head was now on a level with the table. He asked: "Is Mrs. Robbins present?"

Black eyes snapping, the hard, passionate mouth compressed, Agnes Robbins took the stand. She answered the brief perfunctory questions in an incisive, almost a threatening, manner.

Abruptly the coroner concluded. Five or six sentences—not a word in favor of Chickie.

But the foreman of the jury got suddenly to his feet as though he were for the first time alive to the situation.

"Mr. Coroner, I'd like to inquire a bit if that's agreeable to you." Then he said to Mrs. Robbins: "Before this baby was born did the mother ever ask you about caring for it, or did she say she wanted to board it out or get rid of it in any way at all?"

"No—she never did. But she talked about the child."

"What did she say?"

"She said she hoped it would be a son, because a girl has often to suffer so, and it is easier to be a man. She often said she hoped it would be glad for life and that it would be a happy thing."

Agnes said that softly. A man raised a handkerchief and wiped his eyes. Chickie sat with her head down. She could have cried then; could have found the tears Jonathan wished her not to shed—found them now, seeing even her spirit bared, even its inmost, holy anguish bared.

"Did she ever say she was sorry to have a child?"

"No—she never did. And she made all its clothes, and wanted them pretty with ribbons and bits of lace. She did all that."

"After the child was born did she notice it? Did she seem to care for it?"

"Yes! She had Mrs. Faris move the basket right next to her bed, and she used to stare at it a long while. She often touched its hair; she often asked me if I thought it was pretty. She said it had such lovely hands."

"Did the mother ever ask you about smothering a child?"

Agnes Robbins glanced hastily across the room to the lawyer. She hesitated, then, vehemently: "Yes, she did! I'll tell you

why. She fell asleep once with the baby at her breast. She dreamed that she rolled on it and crushed it. She was so frightened that afterward she wouldn't even close her eyes when she held it. I've dreamed that very thing myself with my own children in my arms! Every mother does! Does it mean we want to smother our children?"

"Was the child weak?"

"It was half dead when it was born. I'll tell you about it. It never cried; it wouldn't nurse. Mrs. Faris and I told each other that it wouldn't live. Emily Faris said to me: 'Oh—the poor, weak little thing. It will soon go. Even my Clemency was stronger by a thousand times.' That's what she said to me."

"Did you ever tell this to the mother?"

"No—I didn't."

The juror asked timidly: "Will Mrs. Faris answer some questions?"

The nurse sat bolt upright—her double chin aqiver: "Well, I've spoken, haven't I?"

"I'd like to know if you remember moving the baby's basket to the mother's bed?"

"Yes, I did that."

"Did the mother ever say to you that she thought her child was pretty?"

"Yes—well, she said that."

"Did you say to Mrs. Robbins that it hadn't long to live?"

"It was a poor little thing—I've said that right along. My children were all strapping, not to be compared with it. We talked about it, of course, we did—"

"Did the mother tell you that it was because of a dream that she was frightened about the smothering?"

"That's what she said—"

"That's all, Mrs. Faris."

A softness like a sigh of relief went over the room—a gracious thing. Chickie, half bowed against Jonathan, didn't hear—didn't see the men in the jury one by one glance at her as she sat in that attitude of desperate, appealing acquiescence. Jonathan's voice was in her ears: "Oh, 'twill be all right—all right, Chickie girl—"

The moments dragged. There was a tapping of feet, a scraping of the chairs. Some one went to the window and raised it. Still the jury was out.

A sharp exclamation: "They're coming—"

The foreman read: "It is the verdict of this jury that the infant known as Merle Clayton came to its death by natural causes. We recommend that hereafter the physician in charge report similar cases to the coroner."

There were women who cried when that judgment was given. There was one who rushed up to Jonathan and said: "God bless you—bless you, sir!"

Others that would have crowded about Chickie—smiling. But he put his arm gently about her. He took her away—his own heart bursting then.

The lawyer Jake had sent drove them home. Jonathan held her in his arms as though she were a child. She cried. He whispered: "Crying, Chickie girl—we're going home. Don't be crying now, for Jennie—don't do that, Chickie girl." He murmured things like that and passed his rough hand over his face.

Not even a day since they had left. Only a day since they had learned. Long enough to bring the darkness.

They drove into the hushed and quiet street, and a light was in the window. Chickie pressed her face against her father's arm. She said: "Jonathan—don't take me back—oh, I wish we weren't here—"

"Little Jennie—think what to-day has been to her—come, brave now—you won't cry when it's over, will you—"

And he carried her up the steps. And in a moment Jennie's hands were clasped about her face and they drew it down and wept on it.

Chickie said—"Mother—oh, mother—don't—mother—you cry so—"

Jennie only said: "Chickie, dear—my Chickie—"

Some one came from the shadow then. It was Mary. She caught Chickie in her arms. She said in her deep, mellow tones: "Chickie—oh, if I'd known—if I'd known—"

And when Jonathan carried Chickie to her bed, Mary knelt beside her; Mary untied her shoes. She pleaded: "Don't let it make a difference in us. It won't make a difference between us, Chickie."

Chickie said faintly: "Yes—Oh, Mary, how I want to die—"
Mary kissed her.

And a long, long while, in the blessed lapse of consciousness Chickie felt the sweet, cool lips—heard echoing gently: "No—"

I won't let it make a difference—after all these years, Chickie—between us—oh, no—"

Chickie felt that she was dying and she carried this love of Mary's with her—to a darkness and a peace. She was glad to feel it close about her—

Then the light came and the sun and there were flowers everywhere. Jennie was standing at her bed. Jennie said: "There are letters, Chickie, dear."

It was late in the next afternoon. The letters were from Janina—swift, passionate things. She wanted to come. "Chickie, let me come—I want to see you. I want to see you. You can't imagine how this hits me. Please—let me come."

Chickie said—"Oh, so many flowers, Jennie." The room was brilliant with them as though the world were all new blossomed—tulips and lilies and streams of the bright blue larkspur. There at her bed—a basket—

Who sent her flowers—who sent the beauty of the spring to her?

Jennie said: "There is a note."

The flowers were from Jake—and the note, too, was from Jake.

CHAPTER CXIV

FAREWELL

FLOWERS for her who felt her life all finished and the beauty of it gone. Radiance about her, but a hush and numbness in her heart. Oh, this was kind in Jake—fine, kingly thing to do. Like him.

This was the note: "Little White Darling—Don't let this sadness rob or cheat you. Take it as a richening of your life. You can, Helena dear—you are going to do this. We must see that you do. In a little while, when you are rested, let me come."

Oh, no; she wouldn't see him—see no one. Never hear a word of love again. All that was ended. Leave her alone, then she could keep her lips all quiet; then she could even smile.

She could look at Jonathan and smile. She said to him, "You are better than a God—you are." It made her cry because he chuckled then.

For there was awe and gentleness about the house as when one who is beloved and beautiful has passed, and those to whom she was so dear sit about and tell of all her lovely grace and read the words of comfort friends have sent. Chickie knew that in their secret thought they mourned and mourned. She knew that, lying in the dark now, they held each other's hands and wept.

Jennie's eyes were full of this. They hurt her. Yet she followed her mother to the kitchen, followed her to the garden. Jennie sometimes turned and, reaching up her thin, soft hands, drew Chickie's lips silently to her old face.

In those moments Chickie thought, "Oh, if I were only old; oh, if I could only get away." And she wondered what her life could ever be, and she saw it stretch out dim and empty—oh, a bleak and tragic thing.

She sat long hours in the little summer house Jonathan had built. She sat with her hands clasped, Wildie at her feet. Sometimes she tried to read. Images marched relentlessly. She dozed, dreaming the baby lay in her arms. She touched

its face gayly. Suddenly there was one standing at her side. And he stooped, ran his fingers through the silky hair, saying all bonny and laughing: "Looks like me, frail—like me!"

Her thoughts conquered her; they held her down. Jennie noticed this: "Chickie, dear, we can't go on like this. We must go out. You can't stay in the house always. No—"

"Mother, let me stay. I won't go out. Oh, every one is watching at the windows. They stare even when our door is opened."

It was true. Jonathan might say forever: "Brave, proud now, Chickie girl." But it was too much to ask that she should walk along this block where all her happy girlhood was; walk now into a flame of hot and curious eyes; walk into that and keep her head erect?

Oh, she was not Janina. She couldn't ride the open sea and laugh when the shore was nowhere to be seen.

Martha Blake came to her gently. She sat at her side. They read poems together—but that was terrible to Chickie. Finally she reached out her hand and closed the book. Martha said: "Chickie, you are too young to be vanquished."

"But I am, Mrs. Blake—oh, you see that I am."

"No, Chickie, there is much that is rich and fine in life."

"I don't want it—I don't want it! Oh, I've had enough of life—you don't know—"

"Perhaps I know a little, Chickie. Some of the most beautiful flowers in the world grow in a harsh and bitter soil. You mustn't refuse to let them grow—"

"I don't want them."

"You have to live, Chickie. You have to meet bravely the new life that will come to you. You can not be like all the poor, unhappy women of the world accepting the old traditional brand; taking the scarlet letter from their dress and burning it on their souls. Isn't that very old fashioned, Chickie? Didn't you tell me there were free, braver things to-day?"

"Oh—it was easy to talk then. I didn't know that life could be so hard . . . I didn't know things could burn and burn so—"

"You punish those who love you, Chickie—you keep them sad—"

"I've done that already—it's too late to think of that—"

"No—it isn't—"

That night Jonathan stood beside her chair. He squared his shoulders, saying valorously: "Suppose my girl and me and our dog go out for a walk? Well—?"

Because of Martha Blake and what she said, Chickie went. She held to Jonathan's arm. She tried to keep her head high. He wanted that—proud old Jonathan.

But Sarah Dillon passed, halted with an abrupt, startled "Oh!" Then swiftly: "Good evening, Chickie! Good evening, Mr. Bryce!" and hurried on, red with embarrassment. Chickie only caught the astonishment on Sarah's face as though it were a shocking thing that she should walk in the sweet evening time; walk quietly and laugh with Jonathan.

Oh—the past was her shadow—she couldn't put it from her . . . It walked at her side; it crowded her to the wall. She said to Jonathan: "Oh—you see—now you see. Jonathan, let me go—let me go away—"

He ran his hand down his cheek, back and forth—"Ah—ah—you want to go away?"

"I want to die—if you could only know how much—"

"Chickie, girl, you won't do that. You wouldn't treat your old dad so?"

"Oh—after all I've done—"

"Now—now—what did you do? Why, you had a little child, and your old father would have taken it—didn't you know that—"

A little wild laugh—"And Jennie—oh, that would have killed her—"

"Hush—hush now—"

"Will you let me go, Jonathan? I have to work again. Oh—I could never start in here—I could never face them all—I want to be alone—maybe not so long—"

"You're all I have, Chickie—"

"Oh, you kill me, saying this. Just for a while—just for a while—"

"Then let us go, too."

But she wouldn't have this—it was too much the way Jennie touched her hands—the way Jennie's lips so often twisted and her eyes were wet on Chickie's face—

Jennie said to her: "So you want to leave—you want to go away?"

"Oh—only for a while—for a little while, mother—can't you see—"

So they took their hearts and crushed them in their hands. They said, "If you must, Chickie—if you must—then go—not for long—not for very long—"

She stood in the room they had made so bright for her. She took quietly the things from her bureau. Then she knelt before her open trunk. It was twilight in the room.

She knelt there. Tears were in her eyes. She wondered what it was that made her cry. Oh—it was leaving them, perhaps—oh—it was everything.

And as she knelt, there came a step—Jonathan of course—There came a sound and some one knelt beside her. It was Jimmy. He put his arms about her. One hand with a piercing gentleness took hold of hers.

She tried to run—tried to get away, feeling suddenly her life all broken and his with it.

But he lifted her. He said, "Chickie, do you want me, now?"

She turned hard against him, pressing her face low on his arm: "Jimmy—let me go—oh, Jimmy, you ask me that—let me go—" And stifled the moans that tore what little heart she still had left, tore it all in two.

Then she felt that Jimmy cried. He was crying, too. He said: "I love you, Chickie—don't you want me now—let me take you away—"

"Jimmy, let me go. Oh, if I could only die. Oh, Jimmy, there isn't any place in the world, nor any one, nor anything. And if any one really loved me do you know what they would do? They would come in here to-night when I am sleeping; they would come and kill me. I would do that thing myself except for Jonathan. He asked me not to—"

Jimmy only said: "No—not that, Chickie—do you want me—why don't you take me now?"

She said: "I've done you too much wrong—I've hurt you so—it could never be—never—oh, I would see it always in your eyes. Every time I looked at you, it would be there—"

"I don't think of you that way, Chickie. I don't think of you that way. I never would. You mean because of things I've said?"

"I didn't understand, Chickie. Can't you see? I've loved you always. You need me, perhaps. Don't go away alone."

He held her hands in both of his. She stooped and pressed her lips to Jimmy's hands. "You're good, Jimmy, darling."

You're good. No—don't. I couldn't—oh, not now—not now—not after this. You don't know, Jimmy, but there's nothing left of me—nothing at all."

Jimmy drew her to him. But he didn't speak. She could tell that his lips were shaking, and his hands, too. He said, quietly: "It's because you couldn't love me, Chickie. Is that it? But if you change—if you want me at any time—I love you now, Chickie. It's hard to let you go alone."

"But I must, Jimmy—yes." She raised her face then: she met Jimmy's dark fine eyes. She said, softly: "What you say will help. Oh, it will help so much. Jimmy, you're good to say these things to me. Oh, you have a noble way to love."

Jimmy turned his head away. There was sadness in it. Yet Chickie felt a strengthening; felt a certain pride awake within her thought.

She closed her door when Jimmy left. She clasped her hands against her lips. A thing that was gentle, that was even sweet, went stirring through her. Oh, people loved her—even yet. Oh, Jonathan had gone to death for her; Jake had come, and Jimmy, man now. Jimmy, who had loved since he was a boy because she was so pure—because she was an angel—Jimmy loved her yet.

Tears, but not all bitter now, were on her face. Worthy—oh, they would ask that of her, only that. Brave—go bravely. Let the deep, rich flowers Martha spoke of grow. Plant them in her sorrow—plant them deep. And there might come about her spirit, even as in her face—beauty that is of stars and lilies.

THE END

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